OPEN ACCESS

Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences

ISSN 2538-919X

Examining the Reasons Behind Street Children Working and Staying on the Streets in Pakistan: A Narrative Analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Street Children,
Mental Health,
Pakistani Culture,
Intervention Proposal,
Sociocultural Factors

ABSTRACT

This study explores the underlying reasons that compel children in Pakistan to live and work on the streets, using a narrative analysis approach. While poverty is often cited as a major factor, this research reveals a more complex interplay of cultural, emotional, and societal influences. Conducted in Lahore, Pakistan, the study involved semi-structured interviews with 25 street children, allowing their lived experiences to guide the investigation. Through narrative analysis, three central stories emerged—Born into Poverty, Parental Death/Illness, and Going to School and Working on the Streets—each reflecting overlapping but distinct realities. Six key themes were identified: Becoming the Parent, Being Poor and Helpless, Familial Relations, Educational Aspirations and Realities, Societal Reflections, and Lost Childhood to Hopeful Future. These narratives shed light on issues such as disrupted family structures, dissatisfaction with the public education system, abuse by authorities, and the children's emotional resilience. Despite their harsh circumstances, many children expressed hope and a desire to support their families, reflecting the collectivist values of Pakistani culture. This study emphasizes the need for more qualitative research into the mental health and socio-cultural realities of street children in Pakistan, with implications for developing culturally sensitive support and intervention programs.

1. Introduction

Research on street children in Pakistan reflects a deeply entrenched social issue shaped by structural poverty, cultural expectations, and limited child protection mechanisms. In urban centres such as Lahore, thousands of children engage in informal labour while navigating fractured access to education, economic pressure, and family survival responsibilities (UNICEF, 2024; ILO, 2021). Understanding street children in Pakistan therefore requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of child labour to examine how social norms, economic

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Cite this article as:

Ayub, B., & Adonu, J. (2026). Examining the Reasons Behind Street Children Working and Staying on the Streets in Pakistan: A Narrative Analysis. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences, 9*(1): 54-79. https://doi.org/10.33422/jarss.v9i1.1702

imperatives, and cultural obligations shape children's lived realities. This study responds to this need through child-centred narratives grounded in contextualised theoretical perspectives.

1.1 Socio-cultural Context and the Normalisation of Child Labour

Street children in Pakistan occupy a social position shaped by intersecting cultural expectations, economic hardship, and family survival strategies. In collectivist societies such as Pakistan, children are often socialised to prioritise family contribution over personal aspirations, reinforcing early economic participation as a moral expectation rather than exploitation (Hofstede Insights, 2023; Markus and Kitayama, 2010). Cultural norms surrounding interdependence and obedience normalise children's involvement in income-generating activities, particularly in households experiencing chronic poverty (Maqbool, Newton, and Shah, 2024). Empirical evidence from Pakistan demonstrates that families frequently view children as economic contributors rather than dependents, a perspective reinforced by cultural frameworks that emphasise familial duty and reciprocal care (UNICEF Pakistan, 2024; Gilani, Zahoor, and Iqbal, 2022). This socio-cultural positioning not only legitimises child labour but also obscures its psychological and developmental consequences, embedding it within everyday survival discourse rather than rights-based frameworks.

1.2 Structural and Policy Failures in Child Protection

Despite legislative frameworks prohibiting child labour, enforcement gaps and institutional weaknesses allow street-based child work to persist. Pakistan's Employment of Children Act (1991) and subsequent provincial amendments restrict hazardous child labour, yet informal labour sectors, where most street-working children are employed, remain largely unregulated (International Labour Organisation, 2021). The education system, although officially free until age sixteen, suffers from high out-of-school rates, inadequate infrastructure, and poverty-driven dropouts, particularly among urban low-income families (UNICEF, 2023). Structural barriers such as lack of birth registration, absence of welfare safety nets, rural-to-urban migration, and weak school retention policies further obstruct children's access to formal education and social mobility (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). Consequently, structural exclusion produces a reinforcing cycle in which labour becomes more accessible than schooling, and survival takes precedence over education.

1.3 Psychological and Developmental Consequences

The psychosocial toll of street-based child labour is significant yet often under-recognised in policy discourse. Children working in unprotected environments are disproportionately exposed to psychological stress, trauma, occupational hazards, public harassment, and long-term emotional insecurity (Macleod et al., 2023). Mental health research on street-working children in South Asia highlights high prevalence rates of anxiety, depressive symptoms, disrupted identity formation, and complex trauma responses associated with unstable caregiving, social marginalisation, and economic precarity (UNICEF, 2023). Limited access to psychosocial support and child-focused mental health services intensifies vulnerability, particularly in urban environments where stigma and institutional neglect constrain help-seeking pathways (Macleod et al., 2023).

1.4 Relative Deprivation and the Internalisation of Inequality

Relative deprivation theory (Smith et al., 2012) offers an important lens for understanding street children's lived experiences of exclusion. Beyond absolute poverty, children develop

awareness of inequality through daily comparisons with peers who attend school, live in stable housing, or enjoy social protection. This produces a subjective consciousness of unfairness, reinforcing alienation and diminishing perceived pathways to change (Smith et al., 2012). For working children in Pakistan, deprivation extends beyond income to encompass education, safety, dignity, future aspirations, and social belonging (UNICEF Pakistan, 2023). Research emphasises that chronic exposure to social comparison under conditions of inequality contributes to internalised stigma, diminished self-worth, and resignation to restricted life opportunities (UNICEF, 2023).

1.5 Structural Functionalism and the Social Utility of Child Labour

From a structural functionalist perspective, child labour persists partly because it fulfils implicit economic and social functions within low-income ecosystems. Children supply low-cost, flexible, and unregulated labour that sustains informal markets, supplements household income, and compensates for state welfare inadequacies (ILO, 2021). Families operating at survival thresholds may rely on child earnings to meet daily financial demands, rendering children functionally embedded within economic structures that cannot otherwise absorb systemic poverty shocks (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). While this perspective highlights how child labour is socially sustained, it also exposes the ethical tension between functional economic necessity and long-term developmental harm (de Moura, 2002; Andrioni, 2018).

Policy Landscape After Pakistan's Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment

The Eighteenth Constitutional Amendment (2010) significantly reshaped Pakistan's child protection and education governance by devolving responsibility for labour regulation, education policy, and social welfare to the provinces. This shift created divergent provincial policies with varying levels of enforcement and resource allocation (Ali, Qasmi, and Raza, 2023). For example, Punjab has implemented the Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act (2014), yet implementation gaps persist, especially for working children who face structural and economic barriers to remaining in school.

Child protection systems also remain fragmented. Provincial child protection bureaus, while mandated to identify and support children at risk, face chronic underfunding, limited outreach capacity, and inconsistent coordination with local law enforcement (UNICEF Pakistan, 2020). As a result, many working children, particularly those in informal labour sectors, continue to fall outside institutional safety nets.

This post-devolution landscape underscores the need for context-specific, province-level interventions and explains why many street-working children perceive formal institutions as ineffective or distant, a theme reflected in the present study's findings.

1.6 The Need for an Integrated Theoretical Approach

No single theoretical framework sufficiently explains the phenomenon of street children. Collectivist cultural models explain why child labour may be socially accepted; structural theories explain how institutional failures perpetuate it; psychological research highlights its human consequences; relative deprivation theory clarifies how inequality is internalised; and structural functionalism illustrates why the economic system continues to absorb child labour despite legal prohibitions. Together, these lenses show that street children do not exist outside social systems. Rather, they occupy a social role produced at the intersection of economic need, cultural logic, institutional exclusion, and emotional survival.

1.7 Research Gaps and Study Rationale

While existing scholarship acknowledges the prevalence of street children in Pakistan, far fewer studies foreground children's own narrative accounts of how poverty, culture, social hierarchy, and institutional neglect intersect in their daily lives. Quantitative reports document prevalence and risk factors, but limited research examines meaning-making from children's perspectives, particularly through culturally contextualised narrative methodologies. This gap underscores the need for research that centres children's voices, situates their lived experiences within relevant theoretical frameworks, and informs interventions that move beyond enforcement-based approaches to address dignity, emotional wellbeing, educational inclusion, and family-level economic vulnerability.

Aim: To understand the reasons that force or encourage children to consider the streets a dwelling place and a means for income.

Research Questions:

1. From the child's perspective, what situations compel children to work on the streets?
2. From the children's own experience, what cultural realities contribute to making a child a street child?
3. What personal motivations influence the child towards becoming a street child?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive design using semi-structured interviews to collect in-depth and meaningful data that could not be captured through quantitative methods. The interpretive paradigm views reality as relative and multiple, suggesting that more than one valid understanding of a phenomenon may exist. It emphasises that knowledge consists of contextually grounded interpretations produced by individuals within specific social and cultural environments (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). This philosophical stance was well-suited to examining the lived experiences of street children and understanding how they make sense of the life events and circumstances that led them to street-based work.

The researcher entered the field with prior knowledge of the topic and a shared cultural background with participants. Being of Pakistani ethnicity and fluent in Urdu facilitated rapport-building, yet it also required careful reflexivity to manage potential bias. To address this, a phenomenological approach of bracketing was employed to minimise subjective influence. Gearing (2004) defines bracketing as a "scientific process in which a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon" (p. 1430).

In practice, the researcher engaged in ongoing self-reflection to identify and document personal assumptions and preconceptions through reflexive journaling and discussions with the supervisory team (Habibullah, Mohammed, and Hamza, 2023). Training in reflexivity further strengthened awareness of how personal perspectives might influence the research process. Although full member checking with participants was limited due to the transient nature of the street-working population, follow-up conversations with centre staff and returning participants helped verify interpretations and enhance credibility. Together, these measures contributed to the integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed flexibility to follow participants' cues while maintaining alignment with the study's objectives. Previous research

also suggests that such interviews can have therapeutic value, enabling participants to share freely and provide richer narratives (Mahat-Shamir, Neimeyer, and Pitcho-Prelorentzos, 2021).

2.2 Participants

A purposive sample of 25 street-working children participated in the study. The sample comprised 24 boys and 1 girl, aged 8 to 16 years. Although the sample appears gender-imbalanced, this distribution reflects the field context rather than an absence of female child workers. In urban Pakistan, boys are more visible in public street-based labour, while girls are more commonly engaged in hidden or domestic forms of work (e.g., household help, caregiving), which fall outside the public market settings where recruitment occurred. Consequently, the gender composition of the sample should be interpreted as a contextual feature of the research site rather than a representation of all forms of child labour.

Data saturation was reached after 25 interviews, when no new codes, experiences, or narrative patterns were emerging. This is consistent with qualitative evidence demonstrating that saturation typically occurs within the first 12–20 interviews, with minimal new information thereafter (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The consistency of accounts across participants supported the decision to conclude sampling at this point.

A detailed breakdown of participant ages, schooling histories, parental circumstances, and work activities is provided in Table 1, which presents individual-level characteristics using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Table 1: Participant Information (N = 25)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Locality	Parents Alive	Parental Education	School Status	Type of School	Work Type
Abdul	13	Male	Lahore	Yes	Father 5th class; Mother 10th	Currently in class 5	Government	Helper at shoe shop
Rehman	12	Male	Lahore	Yes	Both illiterate	Attended till class 2	Government	Sells biscuits
Ariz	16	Male	Lahore	Yes	Both illiterate	Attended till class 4	Government	Street barber
Abaas	16	Male	Lahore	Yes	Both illiterate	Attended till class 5	Government	Soda stand worker
Danish	14	Male	Lahore	Yes	Father illiterate; Mother primary school	Attended till class 5	Government	Sells tissues
Adnan	16	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Religious education completed	Private	Sells religious goods
Faizan	9	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 2	Government	Vegetable stall helper
Farhan	15	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 8	Government	Car washer
Hassan	11	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Currently in class 2	Government	Sells tissues

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Locality	Parents Alive	Parental Education	School Status	Type of School	Work Type
Aliya	11	Female	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 2	Government	Sells socks
Saeed	16	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 9	Government	Waiter at juice bar
Majid	14	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 4	Private	Runs corn stall
Khalid	9	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Currently in class 4	Government	Sells tissues
Nauman	16	Male	Lahore	Both deceased	Illiterate	Attended till class 5	Government	Office boy
Ruhan	13	Male	Lahore	Father deceased	Illiterate	Attended till class 2	Government	Odd jobs
Pervaiz	12	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Currently in class 1	Government	Works at soda stand
Sameer	16	Male	Lahore	Father deceased	Illiterate	Currently in class 9	Government	Sells masks
Nabeel	13	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 3	Government	Tea stand worker
Ali	15	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 5	Government	Sells digital counters
Faisal	16	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 5	Government	Waiter at eatery
Hamza	8	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Currently in class 2	Government	Sells books
Zaid	15	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 5	Government	Waiter at juice bar
Akram	16	Male	Lahore	Mother deceased	Illiterate	Attended till class 5	Government	Learning welding
Atif	16	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 9	Government	Sweeper
Shah	16	Male	Lahore	Yes	Illiterate	Attended till class 5	Government	Flower shop worker

Note. *All names are pseudonyms. Participants were street-working children who returned home after work; none lived on the streets.*

2.3 Research Instruments

An interview schedule was developed in alignment with the research questions, designed to elicit the reasons and circumstances underlying children's engagement with street work. The questions were open-ended, allowing participants to express their experiences and perspectives in their own words.

The instrument included prompts about family background, education history, daily work routines, challenges, and aspirations. It was first written in English, translated into Urdu, and then back-translated into English (Brislin, 2001) to ensure conceptual and linguistic accuracy. A pilot interview was conducted to test clarity and cultural appropriateness, after which minor revisions were made.

2.4 Procedure

The researcher travelled to Pakistan for data collection. With support from the Read Foundation, a national organisation providing education and welfare assistance to underprivileged children, access to participants was ethically and practically facilitated. The Read Foundation introduced the researcher to community gatekeepers who were already engaged with children working in the urban market areas of Lahore. These gatekeepers, who were local outreach officers familiar with the children's contexts, played a crucial role in establishing trust and ensuring that recruitment was culturally appropriate and sensitive.

The involvement of gatekeepers was particularly valuable because they possessed established relationships and contextual knowledge of the street-working population, enabling a safe and respectful introduction of the researcher to potential participants. Their role was limited to facilitating initial contact and confirming eligibility based on inclusion criteria, ensuring that participation remained entirely voluntary. This approach aligned with ethical best practices for research involving vulnerable children, where trusted intermediaries help minimise distress, protect anonymity, and foster informed participation.

Recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new information or patterns emerged and the data began to repeat (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). This process resulted in a final sample of 25 participants, as the final interviews yielded information consistent with earlier accounts and did not contribute additional insights.

To ensure ethical integrity, particular care was taken in managing incentives and safeguarding procedures. All participants received a modest food voucher following the completion of the interview. The voucher was not disclosed beforehand to avoid any perception of coercion or undue influence, consistent with ethical guidance for research with vulnerable children (Alderson and Morrow, 2020). The value of the voucher was intentionally minimal and intended only to acknowledge participants' time rather than to serve as a material inducement. Participants were informed that their decision to participate or withdraw at any stage would not affect their access to any form of support.

Safeguarding protocols were implemented throughout data collection. Interviews were conducted in open and public locations near marketplaces to ensure visibility, safety, and minimisation of risks associated with interviewing minors. Public locations also reflected the children's daily working environment, reducing disruption and avoiding private or secluded settings that could compromise child protection standards. Before each interview, the researcher assessed the environment to ensure that it was safe, non-threatening, and appropriate for conversation. The researcher was trained in safeguarding and in recognising signs of distress. Participants were reminded that they could pause or end the interview at any time. In cases where discomfort or fatigue became evident, the interview was stopped immediately, and appropriate support was offered through gatekeepers and child welfare staff present in the vicinity.

Informed consent was obtained from participants and, where possible, their parents or guardians. Consent and debrief forms were translated into Urdu and presented in both written and verbal formats to ensure comprehension for participants with limited literacy. Given the

participants' ages (11 to 16 years), the consent process followed Gillick competency guidelines to ensure that each child demonstrated understanding and voluntary agreement before participation (Griffith, 2016).

Interviews were conducted in public and familiar locations, such as open areas near marketplaces, to reduce vulnerability and ensure participant safety. Each session was conducted in Urdu by the researcher, recorded with permission, and supplemented by field notes capturing non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Following each interview, the researcher completed reflexive memos to document emotional responses, emerging insights, and positional reflections. These practices contributed to the study's ethical transparency and reflexive integrity.

2.5 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using narrative analysis, specifically following Emden's (1998) core-story reconstruction method, which facilitates the identification and reshaping of participants' narratives into coherent thematic stories. Analysis involved examining both content (what was said) and structure (how it was said), allowing for an interpretive understanding of how participants constructed meaning around their experiences.

To ensure transparency and rigor, an audit trail was maintained, documenting each stage of the analytical process. The analysis followed Emden's (1998) procedures: interviewer questions were removed, key phrases condensed, and fragments grouped to form coherent core stories that captured each participant's central experiences. These individual stories were then compared across participants to identify shared subplots and collective themes.

A coding framework was developed to track the analytical flow from raw transcript to emergent themes. Initial descriptive codes were applied to meaningful phrases and sentences, which were then clustered into interpretive codes representing psychological, social, and economic dimensions of the children's experiences. These clusters informed the formation of broader narrative categories (e.g., family dislocation, street as survival space, education as aspiration).

Although the primary coding and narrative reconstruction were conducted by the researcher, steps were taken to enhance reliability and reduce interpretive bias. Regular peer debriefing sessions were held with supervisory team members, who reviewed sections of coded transcripts, challenged emerging interpretations, and examined the consistency of analytic decisions. This process served as a form of intercoder verification that is appropriate for narrative and phenomenological approaches where depth and coherence are prioritised over multiple coders (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Full member checking was not feasible due to the mobility of street children and the ethical restrictions associated with repeated contact. Many participants were transient and not consistently accessible in the same market areas, which limited opportunities for follow-up conversations. However, partial verification was carried out through informal discussions with organisational staff and with several children who were still available during subsequent visits. These exchanges helped confirm that the reconstructed core stories adequately reflected participants' intended meanings. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout to document analytic decisions and monitor the researcher's assumptions, further contributing to the credibility and confirmability of the findings in line with qualitative trustworthiness principles (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.6 Audit Trail

An audit trail was created to document the systematic development of the analysis and to enhance the study's transparency, dependability, and confirmability. The audit trail followed the sequential stages outlined by Emden (1998), ensuring that each transformation of data could be traced from the original transcript to the final core story. To illustrate this process, **Figure 1** presents the *Core-Story Analysis and Validation Framework*, integrating the Emden (1998) stages with validation methods such as peer debriefing, triangulation, member reflections, and audit documentation.

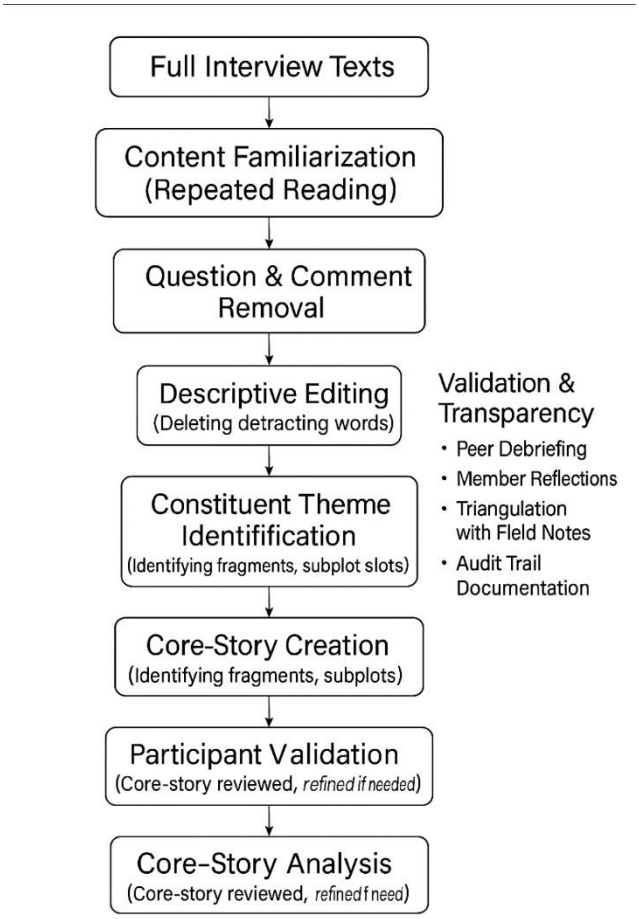

Figure 1. Core-Story Analysis and Validation Framework (adapted from Emden, 1998)

2.7 Integration of Narrative and Thematic Analysis

The primary analytical approach in this study was narrative analysis, which is well suited for capturing the complexity and depth of the lived experiences of street children in Pakistan. However, to ensure a systematic representation of recurring ideas and social patterns across individual stories, thematic analysis was subsequently applied. This dual-layered approach balanced the holistic and interpretive strengths of narrative inquiry with the pattern-recognition capability of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2021).

2.8 Sequential Integration Process

Narrative reconstruction was undertaken first, following Emden's (1998) core-story method, producing coherent participant narratives that retained each child's tone and contextual meaning.

These reconstructed stories became the primary units of analysis for a second-level thematic analysis. Using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, the researcher familiarised herself with each story, generated initial codes, organised these into potential themes, refined and named them, and finally wrote integrative narratives linking these themes to participants' lived experiences.

The narrative layer ensured that each participant's voice and sequence of events remained intact, while the thematic layer distilled commonalities across stories, highlighting social, emotional, and structural dimensions such as poverty, family instability, and educational aspiration.

2.9 Complementarity and Validation

Integration was iterative: insights from thematic coding informed re-examination of individual narratives, ensuring coherence and authenticity. Validation occurred through peer debriefing, member reflections, and triangulation with field notes. The audit trail provided transparency across analytic stages, linking raw data to both narrative and thematic outcomes.

This combined analytic strategy provided a multi-layered interpretation: narrative analysis revealed how children made sense of their experiences, while thematic analysis demonstrated what patterns and meanings were shared across participants.

2.10 Ethical Approval

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bedfordshire. All research activities conformed to institutional and international ethical standards for conducting research with minors and vulnerable populations.

3. Results

The analysis was guided primarily by narrative analysis, selected for its ability to capture the depth and complexity of street children lived experiences. This approach preserved the sequence and meaning of participants' accounts while foregrounding the cultural and social contexts in which their stories unfolded (Riessman, 2008). To complement this depth, thematic analysis was applied to provide breadth, helping to identify recurring patterns across individual narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The integration of these methods ensured that the findings reflected both the individuality of children's voices and the collective themes emerging across the group.

Using Emden's (1998) core story analysis, each interview was reconstructed into a coherent account with a beginning, middle, and end. This process allowed for the development of narratives that were faithful to participants' perspectives while highlighting shared social and emotional dimensions. Through this combined analytic approach, three core stories were identified: "Born into Poverty," "Parental Death/Illness," and "Going to School and Working on the Streets." Although overlapping in some respects, each story represents a distinct pathway into street labour, shaped by the interplay of poverty, family circumstances, and educational challenges.

Key Themes

The analysis identified six overarching themes, each with related subplots that illuminate the lived experiences of street children in Pakistan:

Theme 1: Becoming the Parent

Theme 2: Being Poor and Helpless

Theme 3: Familial Relations

Subplot 1: Satisfaction in Supporting Family

Subplot 2: Family Relationship Dynamics

Theme 4: Educational Aspirations and Realities

Subplot 1: Desire for Education

Subplot 2: Experience of Government School

Theme 5: Societal Reflections

Subplot 1: Abused by Authorities

Subplot 2: Poor Public Attitude

Theme 6: Lost Childhood to Hopeful Future

Subplot 1: Lost Childhood

Subplot 2: Lack of Social Life

Subplot 3: Hopeful for the Future

Each of these themes is presented below, interpreted within a narrative framework and supported by children's accounts.

3.1 Theme 1: Becoming the Parent

A central theme was the way children assumed adult responsibilities, effectively stepping into parental roles to sustain their families. This process of "becoming the parent" was shaped by poverty, illness, and cultural expectations of filial duty. The narratives illustrate how children framed their decisions to work as moral obligations rather than imposed burdens, reflecting their integration of care, sacrifice, and responsibility.

From the core story of "Born into Poverty," Danish explained: *"Sometimes you have to take responsibility for everyone… my father had been doing it, now I need to do it too."* His words capture how children observed parental struggles and felt compelled to continue the cycle of provision. Abdul and Hamza's accounts, part of the core story of "*Staying in School and Working,"* reveal the tension between education and responsibility. Abdul described: *"I saw my dad is stressed out because of money so I asked my dad to let me work here and earn some money for the family."* Similarly, Hamza emphasised agency in his decision*: "No one forced me"; it was my own decision. I saw how bad things were getting; I had to do something."* Both stories highlight the children's desire to balance school with work, despite exhaustion and strain.

From the core story of "Parental Illness," Faisal expressed the impact of his father's deteriorating health: "*When my father became ill, I knew I had to step up and fill his shoes. If it means I need to sacrifice my education, I would."* His narrative shows how illness not only disrupted family stability but also reinforced cultural norms of sacrifice and duty.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate how street children's narratives of work are deeply tied to their lived family circumstances and broader cultural values. Becoming a parent was not solely about earning income, but about embodying responsibility, fulfilling filial obligations, and ensuring household survival.

3.2 Theme 2: Being Poor and Helpless

Poverty emerged as a dominant theme shaping the experiences of street children, who repeatedly described feelings of helplessness and resignation in relation to their financial circumstances. Their narratives reflect both the daily struggle to meet basic needs and the emotional burden of having no choice but to work, underscoring the inescapable link between poverty and street life.

From the core story "Born into Poverty," Zaid expressed: *"I do not have a choice… Poverty makes your life very difficult; it takes the ability to choose from you."* Danish similarly noted the "*hand-to-mouth"* reality of his family, observing that he sells tissues reluctantly, yet feels compelled to contribute: "Every day, I have to struggle and make ends meet. So imagine if I did not work, we would probably be starving." Farhan added to this by describing irregular work such as car washing and the humiliation of precarious employment: *"When you are poor, you do not have much of a choice. You have to work."* These accounts highlight the sense of inevitability and lack of agency associated with poverty.

The core story of "Parental Illness and Death" further illustrated this helplessness. Hamza described the strain of his father's illness: *"We do not have anything at home… I am helpless."* Aliya echoed this, noting the impossibility of balancing school with work: *"I was helpless and had to take this decision… we would not eat because we cannot buy food if I did not work."* Their reflections underscore how poverty is intensified when illness disrupts family stability, pushing children prematurely into adult responsibilities.

In the core story "Staying in School and Working," Sameer linked poverty directly to the challenge of balancing education with survival: *"Financial things at home are terrible… I have to come here every night so we can eat and get my mother's medicines."* Despite the struggle, he drew strength from his late father's advice about education, stressing the need to "*break this cycle of poverty."*

Collectively, these narratives demonstrate that helplessness was not merely an emotional state but a structural reality. Children consistently portrayed themselves as trapped between the immediate necessity of work and the hope for education or a better future. Theme 2 thus reveals poverty as both a material condition and a lived experience of constraint, where survival often came at the expense of childhood and choice.

3.3 Theme 3: Familial Relations

Familial relationships emerged as a central theme, revealing how street children's motivations and experiences were shaped by their ties with parents, siblings, and the wider family. While many children derived satisfaction from supporting their families and received positive reinforcement, others reported neglect and even abuse.

3.3.1 Subplot 1: Satisfaction in Supporting Family

Children frequently described strong cultural and moral obligations to support their families, framing their contributions as both duty and source of pride. Their accounts illustrate how working on the streets was not only about survival but also about fulfilling valued roles within the household.

From the core story "Born into Poverty," Zaid explained: *"I feel extremely happy when I give money to my parents… This is our culture in Pakistan, we do not leave our families and think of ourselves."* Similarly, Faizan described the joy of seeing his mother's smile after receiving his earnings: *"It is not much money that I earn, but at least in my heart, I am satisfied that I earned it for my family."* Abaas emphasised his sense of duty: *"They have done so much for me, so it is about time I gave them back."* These narratives highlight the emotional satisfaction and sense of reciprocity attached to providing financial support.

In the core story "Parental Death/Illness," Sameer's account reflected deep pride in supporting his widowed mother*: "I feel proud that I am helping my mother… She has had only me since the passing of my father.*" His reflections link survival responsibilities with love and recognition, reinforcing a sense of meaning in sacrifice.

Children who combined schooling with work also spoke of satisfaction in helping parents. Abdul remarked: *"Everyone around me says I am doing a good job by also attending school and helping my dad… Giving your parents is like the best feeling."* For Abdul, family recognition became a motivator to persevere with both education and labour.

Together, these accounts reveal that financial contributions were imbued with emotional weight. Family praise and cultural expectations reinforced the idea that working children were fulfilling rightful obligations, framing sacrifice as meaningful rather than merely burdensome.

3.3.2 Subplot 2: Family Relationship Dynamics

While many participants reported supportive family environments, others revealed strained and abusive dynamics, showing the complexity of familial relations under poverty.

Positive accounts were common. Abdul described his family as united: *"We play and eat together and look after each other… I see my parents as my friends because they know what is best for me."* Zaid similarly spoke of gratitude for his family's support, contrasting his situation with peers who lacked such bonds*: "I know some children who have no one… I am grateful to God for family."* Nauman emphasised the protective role of his siblings after losing his parents, while Aliya highlighted her mother's care, noting: *"My parents make sure we have eaten… they encourage me to bring home the money I make every day."* These stories align with core stories of poverty and parental illness but suggest that strong bonds provided children with resilience amidst hardship.

By contrast, other accounts revealed neglect and abuse. Faisal described severe physical abuse by his father, recounting incidents that left long-lasting trauma and eroded his self-esteem. Hassan expressed confusion about his father's violent behaviour: *"I don't understand if they want me to go to school, then why do they hit [me]? If I give them less money, sometimes I am just so confused."* Rehman, too, reported being beaten despite contributing financially: *"My dad has never even played cricket with me… I don't understand myself."* These reflections show how children struggled to reconcile filial duty with experiences of rejection and abuse.

Thus, familial relations were revealed as both a source of strength and suffering. For many, family bonds provided motivation, pride, and meaning. For others, however, family life was

marked by confusion, neglect, and abuse, underscoring the dual role of families as both protectors and sources of harm in children's lives.

3.4 Theme 4: Educational Aspirations and Realities

Education emerged as a central theme in the narratives of street children, reflecting both their aspirations and the barriers that prevented them from realising these goals. While many children expressed a strong desire for education, their experiences often revealed tensions between their survival needs and the demands of schooling, alongside dissatisfaction with the quality of government schools

3.4.1 Subplot 1: The Desire for Education

Almost all participating children voiced aspirations for education, though the strength of this desire varied depending on their personal and financial circumstances. For many, education was seen as a path toward a better future, yet the immediate demands of survival often took precedence.

Zaid reflected on this conflict, stating that he wished to be in school or at least learning a skill, but instead found himself doing odd jobs to support his family. He described this situation as *"frustrating"* and compared his life to children who attended good schools and prepared for their futures. Zaid linked his experience to his parents' lack of schooling, implicitly suggesting a generational cycle of poverty and illiteracy (Core Story 1: Born into Poverty).

Farhan's account echoed this struggle. He expressed regret at leaving school, particularly when he saw other children attending, yet he resigned himself to the reality that "*street children do not go to school."* His reflection demonstrated how social labels and financial pressures stripped him of confidence and reinforced a belief that education was no longer attainable. This aligns with Core Story 1, where persistent poverty narrows children's options and forces them to accept work over learning.

Aliya provided a different perspective, recalling how her" *father's illness forced her to abandon schooling despite her strong desire to continue".* She remembered fondly the joy of attending classes and longed to return, even imagining the small pleasures of sharing a packed lunch with friends. Her words highlighted the innocence of childhood aspirations cut short by economic necessity (Core Story 2: Parental Death/Illness).

Similarly, Nauman regretted leaving school after the death of his parents. While he acknowledged the financial realities that compelled him to work, he continued to value literacy, recalling his *"school uniform as a symbol of dignity and opportunity".* His determination to learn a trade and improve his circumstances reflected resilience, despite the challenges of poverty (Core Story 2).

Abaas also emphasized the importance of education, describing it as a *"gateway to a better life."* Having left school at sixteen, he lamented the lost opportunity for personal development, particularly in skills like technology. Abaas framed education not just as literacy but as a broad foundation for growth and escape from poverty. His reflection revealed frustration at systemic neglect and family inaction, consistent with Core Story 1, which underscores the enduring cycle of generational poverty.

Collectively, these accounts reveal how children balance dreams of education with the pressing reality of survival. While their words carry hope, they also expose deep frustration at being denied opportunities, either by poverty, family circumstances, or social neglect.

3.4.2 Subplot 2: Experience of Government Schools

The second subplot focuses on children's experiences in government schools, which strongly shaped their attitudes toward education. Across the narratives, government schools were often associated with neglect, poor facilities, and even mistreatment, discouraging children from continuing their studies.

Faisal described his schooling as largely meaningless, recalling, "*We had to do chores such as cutting grass or fetching tea for teachers instead of learning".* His experience, aligned with Core Stories 1 and 2, reinforced the perception that children from poor families were treated as free labour rather than students, ultimately pushing him toward work.

Saeed similarly criticised his school, citing a lack of basic facilities, *"we had no desks and chairs",* and recounting instances of teachers exploiting students for personal errands. His account portrayed the school as chaotic and unstructured, undermining any potential educational benefit.

Hasan, still enrolled in a government school, shared strong dissatisfaction. He described the environment as "like a zoo," with strict and unresponsive teachers, poor physical conditions, and a lack of respect for children from poor families. Hasan's comparison of government and private schools revealed his belief that respect and quality education were tied to social class. His frustration suggested that leaving school for work would not be a difficult choice.

In contrast, Usman abandoned school entirely, describing his teachers as "horrible" and negligent. His disillusionment with government schools contributed to his decision to stop studying and focus solely on work, a decision shaped by both negative educational experiences and financial pressures.

Together, these narratives reveal that government schools often failed to provide an environment conducive to learning. Instead of fostering growth, schools were perceived as neglectful or even exploitative, leaving children feeling undervalued and excluded. This, in turn, reinforced the choice to leave education behind and prioritise work.

3.5 Theme 5: Societal Reflections

This theme examines how street children perceive their treatment by wider society, focusing on authority figures and public attitudes. The findings reveal frequent experiences of harassment, neglect, and devaluation, which profoundly shaped the children's self-esteem and sense of belonging. Two subplots emerged: (1) *Abuse by Authorities* and (2) *Poor Public Attitude.*

3.5.1 Subplot 1: Abuse by Authorities

Street children frequently reported negative encounters with police, security guards, and child protection organisations. Their narratives depict intimidation, verbal harassment, physical abuse, and financial exploitation. For many, interactions with authorities reinforced feelings of vulnerability and exclusion.

Abdul described his daily encounters with security guards in the market as *"hell… they treat us like trash, shout at me every day, and it just makes my life harder"* (Core Story 3). Hamza, who had lost his parents, referred to the police as *"the worst… they pick us up for no reason, keep us locked, beat us, and then let us go"* (Core Story 2). Similarly, Faisal recalled repeated mistreatment: *"The police are very harsh and aggressive… they ask us for money, and if we don't give, they hit us"* (Core Stories 1 and 2).

Farhan echoed this frustration, attributing police hostility to poverty: *"Because we are poor, they see us as easy targets… they know we cannot fight back"* (Core Story 1). Rohan, an orphan, expressed anger: *"They treat me like a criminal when I have done nothing wrong… no one cares that I don't have parents"* (Core Story 2).

Although most accounts were negative, a few participants, such as Shah, Salman, Majid, and Farhan, acknowledged that the police were "just doing their job" when preventing begging, though they still criticised their aggression. This inconsistency points to a spectrum of experiences but underlines the broader perception that authorities treat street children as expendable and undeserving of dignity.

Children also expressed frustration with child protection organisations. Abaas recalled: *"They took me to a centre, kept me for a few days, then sent me back… nothing changed. They don't care about why we work"* (Core Story 1). Ali complained: *"They treat us like stray dogs… they don't listen, they just order us around"* (Core Story 1). Akram added: *"They say they are here to help, but they just look down on us"* (Core Story 1). Nauman was sceptical: *"They care more about showing off than helping children like us"* (Core Story 2).

Together, these accounts reflect widespread mistrust and disillusionment with authorities who are ostensibly tasked with protecting vulnerable children.

3.5.2 Subplot 2: Poor Public Attitude

Children's narratives also revealed deep frustration with societal attitudes. Many described being insulted, ignored, or treated as criminals, leaving lasting scars on their self-perception.

Abdul recalled: *"People call me filthy, disgusting… sometimes they don't even look at me. I feel invisible"* (Core Story 3). Yet he noted that mentioning his schooling occasionally evoked sympathy: *"If I say I go to school, sometimes they treat me better"* (Core Story 3).

Faisal, working as a roadside waiter, described frequent rudeness: *"Customers speak badly, like we are not human. They think we are nothing"* (Core Story 1). Danish reflected on stigma: *"People think we are liars or criminals… when they say that, it makes me feel ashamed"* (Core Story 1).

Farhan lamented: *"Society sees us as nothing, like we don't exist"* (Core Story 1). Saeed connected this to generational poverty: *"My mother was not respected as a maid, and now I get the same… poor people like us are always looked down on"* (Core Story 1). Nauman echoed: *"They look at us like dirt on the road… worthless, like we will never achieve anything"* (Core Story 2).

Sameer challenged these labels: *"People say we are criminals or scammers, but they don't know my story… I am here because my father died, not because I chose this"* (Core Story 2). Rehman described being judged for hygiene: *"They say I smell, that I'll spread disease. But it's not my fault. Rich children have everything, we have nothing"* (Core Story 1). Khalid added: *"Some people just wave their hands and tell me to stay away… sometimes one or two give me money, but most don't even look"* (Core Story 1).

These accounts show how negative public attitudes ranging from insults to indifference reinforced feelings of invisibility and worthlessness. Such societal marginalisation compounded the struggles of poverty, exclusion, and exploitation, further entrenching their vulnerable status.

3.6 Theme 6: Lost Childhood to Hopeful Future

Street children in this study carried significant responsibilities at a young age, often sacrificing their childhood to provide for their families. Their reflections reveal a shared sense of lost childhood, limited opportunities for leisure, and a mixture of resignation and hope for the future. This theme is presented in three subplots: Lost Childhood, Lack of Social Time, and Hopeful for the Future.

3.6.1 Subplot One: Lost Childhood

Many children described their present lives as consumed by work, stress, and adult responsibilities. Hamza lamented, *"I do not like my life… I get no rest. I am always just trying to rush… I feel like that old man over there. This is a sad life"* (Hamza, Core Story 1). Danish echoed this sense of helplessness*, "I love my parents, but sometimes when I see other kids, it hurts because I am not like them. They have a childhood; I have responsibilities"* (Danish, Core Story 1).

Farhan spoke of losing his childhood to financial worries: *"I lost my childhood in everyday worries of where the groceries will come from… will we get evicted due to not paying rent*" (Farhan, Core Story 1). Faizan's words reflected resignation: *"I do what my mother wants me to do. No, I do not like my life…but I am helpless"* (Faizan, Core Story 1).

Others turned to faith as a coping mechanism. Rehman shared*, "I ask God why me, but then I am like, God loves me as well, so it's ok"* (Rehman, Core Story 1). Akram expressed both resentment and faith*: "God chose this life for me… However, no one has the right to tell me to stop being a child and be a man. God loves children, but in this society, no one cares"* (Akram, Core Story 1).

For those who had lost parents, grief was tied directly to the loss of childhood. Ruhan reflected, "*I miss the fact that I have no one… I miss my father… He would have let me be like other children. But people tell me to work. Why? Because they don't care"* (Ruhan, Core Story 2).

Across these accounts, childhood was not remembered as play or growth but as sacrifice, marked by feelings of helplessness, grief, and survival.

3.6.2 Subplot Two: Lack of Social Time

Children's lives were dominated by work, leaving little room for leisure or friendships. Faisal described, *"I work seven days a week… poor children do not play*" (Faisal, Core Story 1). Atif laughed at the very idea of free time*: "I don't have a single friend… I work the whole week, and when I get home, I just want to sleep"* (Atif, Core Story 1). Danish reinforced this sentiment: "Free time is a luxury I cannot have" (Danish, Core Story 1).

Even when friendships existed, they were constrained. Farhan explained, *"I have friends… but the thing is that we don't get time… I have lost it all. There is no free time"* (Farhan, Core Story 1). Aliya added, "We have no free time, we sleep, eat and work, and that cycle goes on daily" (Aliya, Core Story 2). Nauman contrasted his life after his parents' death: *"I used to play video games and go to the park… but now I cannot do any of it because I have to work"* (Nauman, Core Story 2).

For some, Sundays offered rare respite. Faizan noted, *"I don't usually get time to be with my friends, just on Sundays… we hang around, or we play Pub G… or watch YouTube"* (Faizan, Core Story 1). Usman added*, "I want to play, go to the movies… but I can't. I work seven days*

a week, and when I go home, I'm very tired. I watch some TV and sleep" (Usman, Core Story 3).

These accounts highlight how social lives and leisure were eclipsed by survival needs, with "free time" framed as a privilege.

3.6.3 Subplot Three: Hopeful for the Future

Despite hardships, many children voiced aspirations for a better future, often tied to self-employment and dignity. Shah shared, *"I will now start saving… I want to open a chicken shop because my dad had one, so I have some knowledge"* (Shah, Core Story 1). Zaid, forced out of school, expressed pragmatism: *"I will most probably open some shop with my brother… I am hopeful, but at the same time when you are poor, you do not have many options"* (Zaid, Core Story 1).

Others emphasized self-reliance. Ali was resolute: *"I am 15 now… I am saving money… I don't want to work for anyone in my life… working for anyone is signing a contract of insult"* (Ali, Core Story 1). Faizan, already engaged in trade, looked to expand*: "I will open a fruit/vegetable shop as well. I don't know anything else, so my boss takes me to the wholesale market… and I see how he's trading"* (Faizan, Core Story 1).

For Rehman, business was a way to regain dignity*: "Open my shop because I don't think I'll ever go to school again… at least I can learn a skill that can land me respect in this market"* (Rehman, Core Story 2). Abaas shared*, "The future for me now only works… the least I could do is open my business and earn a bit of respect"* (Abaas, Core Story 1).

Some envisioned more formal careers. Nauman aspired to military service: "*I really want to join the army… once it's a bit better, I will finish high school and join as a soldier… at least people will respect me then"* (Nauman, Core Story 2). Hamza expressed ambition: *"I want to be a pilot… I am going to work and study at the same time so I can become a pilot, and I don't want to be a beggar on the streets"* (Hamza, Core Story 3). Similarly, Sameer saw education as a path to dignity: *"I want to finish my education… people will respect me because I will be well-educated and well-spoken. Life on the streets for us is not humane. I will use education to break the cycle I am stuck in"* (Sameer, Core Story 3).

Faith also played a role in sustaining hope. Faizan reflected*, "I am thankful, and I'm happy with what God has provided for me, but I want to change my future by working hard… I can use this skill for the rest of my life. So I am grateful to God"* (Faizan, Core Story 1). Shah added*, "God is the planner. If I help myself, I can start my business… Life is tough, but I am not the only one. There are thousands like me"* (Shah, Core Story 1). Majid echoed this faith: *"Life is hard for me, I know that, but I also know that God is there for me… I am sure in ten years He will guide me"* (Majid, Core Story 1).

Together, these narratives highlight resilience and determination. While some saw education or formal employment as a path to dignity, most envisioned self-employment as the most realistic route to achieving respect and independence.

4. Discussion

4.1 Research Question 1: From the Child's Perspective, What Situations Compel Children to Work on the Streets?

The findings confirm that street involvement among children in Pakistan is primarily structurally determined rather than individually chosen. Children explained street work not as an option but as a household survival mechanism, driven overwhelmingly by poverty. Income was described as essential for food security, rent, healthcare, and daily living, reinforcing existing national evidence linking child labour with extreme economic deprivation (Abdullah et al., 2014; ILO, 2021; UNICEF, 2024). Children framed earnings not as contribution, but obligation, signalling how economic survival becomes a family shared responsibility rather than a parental function. These findings support Relative Deprivation Theory in demonstrating how persistent economic exclusion limits mobility and produces intergenerational cycles of disadvantage (Williams, 2017).

Consistent with national statistics, children identified poverty as cumulative and inherited rather than episodic (UNICEF, 2024). Their narratives indicated that street work emerged not from a singular crisis, but from chronic deprivation normalised within household systems, aligning with research demonstrating that child labour is most prevalent in contexts of long term structural hardship rather than short-lived income shocks (ILO, 2021). Importantly, participants did not self-identify as abandoned or disconnected from family. Rather, most returned home daily, confirming that the dominant profile in Pakistan consists of children on the streets rather than of the streets (Abdullah et al., 2014; ILO, 2021).

The moral framing of work reflected collectivist value systems in which children perceive their socioeconomic role as a fulfilment of familial duty rather than exploitation (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2004). Many articulated pride rather than distress when handing earnings to parents, even when physically exhausted or emotionally overwhelmed. This reflects culturally embedded notions of filial obligation where contribution is tied to moral identity and belonging (Triandis, 2004). Unlike dominant global narratives that position child labour primarily as coercion, children in this study often presented work as necessary, rational, and socially meaningful within their family system.

Domestic abuse and family breakdown were reported, but not as the core drivers of street engagement. Although some children disclosed violent home environments, these cases were numerically fewer, reflecting broader evidence that street work in Pakistan is more closely correlated with economic deprivation than parental rejection (Abdullah et al., 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2020). Where abuse existed, it functioned as a compounding rather than primary factor, intersecting with poverty, powerlessness, and lack of institutional protection. The findings therefore caution against over pathologising families while highlighting the urgency of structural support that relieves economic pressure and strengthens household resilience.

4.2 Research Question 2: From Children's Perspectives, What Cultural Realities Contribute to Making a Child a Street Child?

Children's accounts indicated that street involvement is reinforced not only by poverty, but by cultural invisibility, social exclusion, and institutional neglect. Public interactions repeatedly communicated shame, criminal suspicion, or moral inferiority, confirming that street children in Pakistan navigate layered stigma rather than temporary disadvantage. Many described being labelled "thief," "liar," or "dirty," reflecting social identity processes theorised within Stigma Theory and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy frameworks (Jones, 1977; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 2012.

Repeated exposure to negative labelling contributed to internalised marginalisation, with children describing themselves as "worthless" or "without a future," reinforcing psychological pathways from social stigma to self perception and behaviour conformity.

Social exclusion was not merely interpersonal but systemic. Children strongly mistrusted institutions, particularly law enforcement, schools, and child protection organisations. Reports of police intimidation, extortion, and arbitrary detention echo documented institutional vulnerabilities within Pakistan's child protection governance systems (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Rather than being viewed as vulnerable citizens, children repeatedly experienced adult authority as predatory or punitive, weakening possibilities for social reintegration. These findings illustrate how state level structural failures translate into micro level harm, reinforcing the street as both a workspace and a perceived zone of relative autonomy, safety, or predictability.

Education, while deeply valued, was consistently described as inaccessible rather than undesirable. Children expressed desire to learn but cited overcrowded classrooms, discriminatory treatment, teacher disengagement, costs of attendance, and incompatibility with survival labour demands. These structural school level barriers align with national evidence showing that educational exclusion among low-income children in Pakistan is driven less by motivation deficits than systemic infrastructure failures (ILO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). For children balancing hunger, income responsibility, and schooling, education becomes aspirational rather than operational and drop out becomes a rational response rather than failure of interest.

The cultural label street child, while academically debated, has become socially internalised. Many participants self-identified with the label not because it reflected personal identity but because it mirrored societal classification, reproduction of stereotypes, and institutional treatment. This confirms that labelling processes do not merely describe social categories, but shape self-concept, opportunity pathways, and life trajectories.

4.3 Research Question 3: What Personal Motivations Influence Children's Pathways and Persistence?

Despite severe structural constraints, children demonstrated pronounced agency, future orientation, and psychological endurance. Many articulated educational and occupational aspirations while simultaneously recognising the barriers to achieving them. Rather than rejecting school, children reframed education as a hope-based strategy to exit poverty, even if it was not an immediately accessible pathway. This aligns with global evidence that children experiencing adversity continue to imagine aspirational futures, even when opportunities are structurally limited (Masten, 2018; UNICEF, 2021). Their narratives resonate with Adaptive Resilience Theory, which emphasises that resilience is expressed not through the absence of hardship, but through sustained goal formation within constrained choice environments (Ungar, 2021).

Work was not perceived as a form of identity erasure but as a means of constructing dignity. Income generation was associated with agency, capability, and contribution, reframing labour from a victimhood narrative to one of competence and belonging. This is consistent with resilience perspectives that recognise children as active social actors rather than passive victims of circumstance (Masten, 2018). Many participants described earning and supporting their families as emotionally meaningful, morally just, and socially validating, even when physically burdensome.

Faith emerged as a prominent emotional and psychological resource, offering endurance, hope, and meaning-making rather than economic relief. Consistent with evidence on coping among youth in adversity, spirituality functioned as a regulator of distress and a framework for optimism rather than escapism (Koenig, 2012; UNICEF, 2024). For many children, faith narratives compensated for the absence of institutional trust, operating as an internalised resilience system in contexts where external protection was limited.

5. Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample consisted predominantly of boys (24 boys and 1 girl). This imbalance reflects wider structural and cultural patterns in Pakistan, where boys are far more visible in public economic spaces, while girls tend to work in private households, domestic roles, or other hidden forms of labour that are difficult and often unsafe for researchers to access (International Labour Organization, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2019). As a result, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of girls involved in domestic or home-based labour, who face different risks and vulnerabilities.

Second, the study was conducted exclusively in Lahore, a major urban centre with a high concentration of street and working children. However, street children in Pakistan experience varying socioeconomic and cultural conditions across provinces, especially after the 18th Constitutional Amendment devolved child protection, social welfare, and education responsibilities to provincial governments (UNICEF, 2021). Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to rural districts or other urban contexts, where labour patterns, family structures, and policy implementation may vary significantly. This limitation aligns with the purpose of qualitative research, which prioritises contextual depth rather than statistical representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Third, recruitment relied on organisational gatekeepers and facilitators to safely approach children. Gatekeeper involvement is standard practice in research with vulnerable populations to ensure ethical access and protect children from harm. However, it may introduce recruitment bias by favouring children already in contact with frontline workers, more visible in specific market areas, or considered “safe” to approach (Ombudsman Pakistan, 2022). Children who were highly transient, fearful of organisations, or engaged in more exploitative or hidden work may be underrepresented as a result. This is a recognised methodological constraint when studying mobile or marginalised populations.

Taken together, these limitations indicate that the findings should be understood as contextually situated rather than broadly generalisable. Nevertheless, they provide important insight into the lived realities of street children in Lahore and offer valuable directions for policy and practice, especially when considered alongside broader national and international evidence.

6. Implications

The findings must also be interpreted in light of Pakistan’s post–18th Amendment policy environment, where responsibility for child protection and education lies with provincial governments. This decentralised system has resulted in uneven implementation of education laws and variable enforcement of child labour regulations across provinces (Muhammad et al., 2024). Notably, while boys in public spaces are more visible to state actors, girls working in domestic or home-based settings remain largely outside institutional reach (HRCP, 2020;

UNICEF, 2021). Interventions must therefore be sensitive to these gendered patterns of labour and responsive to the limitations of provincial child protection systems.

The findings of this study, when situated within the wider literature, reaffirm that street children in Pakistan cannot be supported through single sector or short-term responses. Consistent with evidence highlighting intersecting deprivation, trauma, stigma, and systemic exclusion (Ali et al., 2019; Bano, 2022; Abdullah et al., 2014), the present study demonstrates that street children's needs span economic survival, psychosocial wellbeing, educational access, and protection from institutional harm. Importantly, the findings also echo research showing that children are not passive recipients of hardship but agents who actively construct meaning, resilience, and aspirations despite structural constraint (Ahmed, 2018; Bano, 2022; Nasir et al., 2013).

These insights have direct implications for future practice, policy, and research design. First, interventions must extend beyond material poverty alleviation to address psychological distress, emotional needs, identity-based stigma, and experiences of institutional exclusion, which were prominent in children's narratives and widely supported by prior research. Mental health support is currently one of the most absent yet urgently needed components of programming for street children in Pakistan, despite evidence linking prolonged street exposure to chronic stress, emotional dysregulation, and long-term trauma symptoms. Embedding accessible, non-clinical psychosocial support into outreach services is therefore essential.

Second, education policy must move beyond enrolment-based models and actively address retention barriers, including poor school environments, economic pressures, and discriminatory treatment. This aligns with the participants' own framing of education not simply as a right but as a route to dignity, mobility, and personal transformation. The findings support a shift toward flexible, stigma-sensitive education pathways linked with financial security for families, a recommendation consistent with national and regional scholarship on education exclusion among vulnerable children.

Third, the pervasive distrust of institutions documented in this study reinforces previous critiques that protection systems often inflict harm rather than provide safety. Children repeatedly associated policing and welfare structures with abuse, neglect, or exploitation, underscoring the need for reforms centred on accountability, safeguarding, and relational trust building. Interventions designed without safeguarding institutional credibility risk further alienating children from formal support.

Lastly, these findings contribute directly to a broader and ongoing doctoral research project in which a holistic, psychosocial intervention proposal has been developed based on lived experience data, resilience frameworks, and social justice-oriented child wellbeing theory. While the intervention itself is not tested or presented in this study, and remains part of a larger continuing research agenda, the evidence presented here reinforces the theoretical necessity of that approach: one that integrates mental health, educational inclusion, family support, and dignity centred social assistance for street children in Pakistan.

Overall, the implications point to a fundamental shift in how street children are conceptualised within policy and practice, moving away from deficit-based narratives toward models that recognise structural harm, prioritise psychosocial wellbeing, amplify children's agency, and treat lived experience as a central foundation for intervention design.

This study explored the lived realities of street children in Pakistan, examining the conditions that lead to street based work, the cultural and structural forces that sustain marginalisation, and the personal motivations shaping children's daily decisions. The findings reaffirm existing literature identifying poverty as the primary driver of street involvement, compounded by

family economic dependency, illness, and weak social protection systems (Abdullah et al., 2014; Nasir et al., 2013). Consistent with previous research, this study also shows that street children navigate layered forms of exclusion, including social stigma, institutional distrust, and systemic educational barriers (Ahmed, 2018; Ali et al., 2023).

Beyond structural adversity, the findings highlight strong personal agency. Children demonstrated purposeful decision making, future aspirations, and resilience expressed through prioritising education, seeking dignity in self-employment, and drawing emotional strength from faith. These motivations align with literature showing that street children actively negotiate restrictive environments rather than passively submit to them (Bano, 2022; Ahmed, 2018). This reinforces the argument that children on the streets must be understood not only through the lens of vulnerability but also as social actors exhibiting adaptive and self directed survival strategies.

The study further establishes that psychological distress, educational exclusion, and public devaluation are not secondary consequences of street involvement but central components of children's lived experiences. These findings corroborate prior evidence that institutional responses in Pakistan remain insufficient, often failing to provide trust, protection, or meaningful mobility pathways (Abdullah et al., 2014; Ali et al., 2023). Collectively, the findings emphasise that street children's realities are shaped by an interaction of structural disadvantage and active coping responses, both of which must be addressed simultaneously.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of street children in Pakistan, highlighting the interplay of poverty, cultural realities, and children's personal motivations. The findings confirm that poverty is the fundamental driver compelling children to work on the streets, often reinforced by family dependence and systemic neglect. At the same time, children's narratives revealed resilience and agency: many aspired to education, small businesses, or found meaning in faith as a source of strength.

This study forms one component of a larger research project that includes the development of a comprehensive intervention proposal. While the full proposal will be presented separately, the empirical findings presented here provide a clear justification for its design. The evidence suggests that sustainable change cannot emerge from short-term welfare responses alone. Instead, support models must integrate educational access, family-level economic strengthening, trauma-informed psychosocial support, and dignity-affirming, child-centred programming that reflects children's own aspirations and social environments.

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