IMPACT OF MEDIA CAMPAIGNS ON SHAPING CHILD WELFARE POLICIES IN MULTAN, PAKISTAN

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Abstract
In the contemporary digital age, media serves as a powerful catalyst for social change and advocacy. This study investigates the role of both traditional and digital media platforms in raising awareness about child labor and influencing child welfare policies in Multan, Pakistan. Drawing on survey data, in-depth interviews, and media content analysis, the research explores public awareness, policy shortcomings, and the root causes of child labor. The study emphasizes media's role in information dissemination, policy advocacy, and community engagement. Guided by Agenda Setting Theory and the Capability Approach, the findings highlight the need for an integrated strategy that merges media advocacy with legislative action and effective policy implementation. The study aims to support the advancement of child welfare initiatives and contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
Keywords: Child labor, Child welfare, Sustainable Development Goals, Media

Introduction
Child labor remains a persistent and deeply rooted challenge in Pakistan, undermining the nation's progress toward sustainable development, human rights, and inclusive economic growth. Despite significant legislative initiatives—such as the Punjab Restriction on Employment of Children Act (2016)—millions of children in Pakistan continue to be engaged in labor, especially in urban and peri-urban regions like Multan (ILO, 2021; Butt, Nasar, & Mehmood, 2020).
Recent estimates suggest that more than 3.3 million Pakistani children work in hazardous environments, threatening their health, development, and educational attainment (UNICEF, 2022). In Multan, children are commonly employed in agriculture, brick kilns, small workshops, street vending, and the service industry. The root causes of child labor are multifaceted, including chronic poverty, family occupation, insufficient educational opportunities, and entrenched social norms (Siddique, Mahmood, & Bakhsh, 2019).
The long-term consequences of child labor are profound—not only does it deprive children of their right to education and a safe childhood, but it also perpetuates cycles of poverty and limits the region's socio-economic progress. Children involved in labor are often exposed to dangerous

working conditions, physical and psychological harm, and exploitation. This not only impedes their personal development but also has lasting negative effects on their families and communities, ultimately constraining national growth and perpetuating inequality.

Although various government welfare programs and legal protections exist, their impact is blunted by low public awareness, inadequate policy communication, and weak interagency coordination. Furthermore, social norms and community attitudes often legitimize child work, making eradication even more complex. Many families remain unaware of the risks, rights, and resources available, while enforcement agencies face challenges due to resource constraints and limited outreach.

In this context, both traditional (television, radio, print) and digital media (social media, news portals) offer substantial potential to reshape public discourse, set policy agendas, and mobilize communities around child protection (ILO, 2017; Hussain et al., 2020). Media platforms can amplify the voices of vulnerable children, expose gaps in policy implementation, and foster a culture of accountability. The increasing penetration of digital media in Pakistan, even in semi-urban and rural areas, has created new avenues for advocacy, education, and community engagement that were previously unavailable.

Given these dynamics, a closer examination of the role of media in addressing child labor is timely and significant. Understanding how different media channels influence public opinion, shape narratives, and advocate for legislative change is crucial for designing effective interventions. Multan, as a major urban center with diverse economic activities and high rates of child labor, serves as a compelling case study to analyze these intersections.

This article explores the interplay between media advocacy and child labor policy in Multan, analyzing the major causes of child labor and recommending holistic, media-driven strategies for sustainable child welfare. By integrating empirical findings with theoretical perspectives, the study aims to contribute actionable insights for policymakers, NGOs, educators, and media practitioners committed to ending child labor and promoting children's rights in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Child labor remains a deeply entrenched issue in Pakistan, particularly in urban centers such as Multan, due to a complex interplay of socio-economic and institutional factors. Numerous studies have identified poverty and inadequate household income as the most significant contributors to child labor. Families facing chronic financial hardship often perceive child labor as a necessary strategy for survival, prioritizing immediate income over long-term educational gains (Butt, Nasar, & Mehmood, 2020). In many households, the income generated by working children is essential to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare, especially in regions with high unemployment and inflation.

In addition to economic pressures, educational barriers further exacerbate the problem. Many families are unable to afford the costs associated with schooling, including tuition fees, uniforms, transportation, and school supplies. Moreover, the lack of adequate educational infrastructure—such as overcrowded classrooms, untrained teachers, and unsafe school environments—discourages enrollment and retention. Long distances to educational institutions, especially in rural-urban fringe areas of cities like Multan, make daily attendance challenging for many children (Ahmad & Mustafa, 2019). Consequently, children from marginalized communities are more susceptible to exploitation and entry into the labor force at an early age.

From a legislative perspective, while Pakistan has ratified various international conventions and introduced domestic laws prohibiting child labor, implementation remains a significant challenge.

The lack of effective enforcement mechanisms, coupled with limited financial and human resources, weakens the impact of these legal frameworks. Corruption, inadequate labor inspections, and insufficient penalties further enable employers to exploit children without fear of consequences (ILO, 2019; Mahmood & Bakhsh, 2018). Many employers prefer child workers due to their lower wage expectations, higher compliance, and limited legal knowledge, which creates a demand that perpetuates the cycle.

Another emerging theme in the literature is the potential of media to play a transformative role in combating child labor. Media, both traditional and digital, serves as a powerful tool for advocacy, awareness-raising, and public engagement. Studies have emphasized the effectiveness of targeted media campaigns in reshaping public attitudes, empowering communities with knowledge of children's rights, and mobilizing support for stricter policy enforcement. Strategic use of radio, television, social media, and print platforms can highlight real-life stories, reveal systemic gaps, and increase pressure on both policymakers and the general public to act against child labor (Hussain et al., 2020; ILO, 2017). Moreover, localized content that reflects regional languages and cultural norms has been found to be more effective in reaching vulnerable populations.

Despite these valuable insights, a critical gap exists in the literature regarding the specific impact and effectiveness of media interventions in urban settings like Multan—a city known for its industrial and informal labor sectors. Most studies provide generalized national-level data or focus on rural environments, leaving a void in understanding how context-specific media strategies could influence attitudes, behaviors, and policy outcomes in urban centers. Therefore, further research is necessary to explore how media-based advocacy can be harnessed to reduce child labor in Multan and similar urban regions, particularly through partnerships between local governments, NGOs, and media outlets.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon two foundational theoretical lenses—**Agenda Setting Theory** and the **Capability Approach**—to analyze the role of media advocacy in addressing child labor in Multan. These theories provide a robust conceptual framework to understand both how media influences public and policy-level discourse, and how child labor undermines children's human development.

1. Agenda Setting Theory

Originally proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, **Agenda Setting Theory** suggests that the media has a significant influence on what the public thinks about by emphasizing certain issues over others. The core premise of this theory is that the media does not tell people *what to think*, but rather *what to think about*. This is achieved through repeated coverage, strategic framing, and prioritization of topics in news reporting and public discourse.

In the context of child labor in Multan, this theory is particularly relevant. Media outlets—whether local newspapers, television news, or social media platforms—possess the power to bring the issue of child labor to the forefront of public consciousness. When media platforms consistently report on the harsh realities faced by working children—such as hazardous working conditions, educational deprivation, or emotional trauma—they effectively shape societal awareness and concern. As highlighted by Hussain et al. (2020), media coverage that portrays the human side of child labor can provoke emotional responses, trigger public debates, and mobilize civic and governmental action.

Moreover, agenda setting extends beyond the general public to influence policymakers. If media narratives consistently frame child labor as a crisis demanding urgent intervention, government agencies and political actors may feel compelled to take responsive action, such as increasing

enforcement of labor laws, allocating resources for child welfare programs, or partnering with NGOs for community outreach. Thus, in this study, the Agenda Setting Theory provides a lens through which to analyze the extent and nature of media coverage on child labor and its potential to drive meaningful change in Multan.

2. Capability Approach

Developed by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen and further elaborated by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the **Capability Approach** is a human-centered framework that shifts the focus from economic growth or utility to individual freedoms and opportunities. This theory argues that development should be assessed based on people's ability to lead lives they have reason to value, emphasizing the expansion of substantive freedoms—such as education, health, bodily integrity, and participation in community life (Sen, 1999).

Child labor directly undermines these capabilities. Working children are often denied access to quality education, experience poor health outcomes, and lack the agency to make choices about their own futures. These deprivations not only constrain their personal development but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and social exclusion. From this perspective, child labor is not merely an economic issue but a profound violation of human rights and dignity.

In this context, the media can serve as a catalyst for restoring and expanding children's capabilities. By exposing the structural causes and lived experiences of child laborers, media platforms can educate the public, generate empathy, and advocate for policies that prioritize children's well-being. For example, campaigns emphasizing the long-term benefits of education, the health risks of hazardous labor, or the importance of children's voices in shaping their futures can all be grounded in capability-based reasoning.

Furthermore, the Capability Approach aligns with global child rights frameworks, such as those promoted by UNICEF and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which advocate for creating environments where children can thrive free from exploitation (UNICEF, 2022). This approach underscores the ethical responsibility of society—including media, policymakers, and civil institutions—to remove barriers that restrict children's freedom and potential.

Integration of Theories

Together, these two theories provide a comprehensive lens for this study. While **Agenda Setting Theory** explains how media can shape discourse and influence policy agendas, the **Capability Approach** offers a moral and developmental rationale for why child labor must be addressed. In combination, they highlight both the *means* (media-driven awareness and advocacy) and the *ends* (enhancing children's freedoms and human development) of the struggle against child labor in Multan. By grounding the research in these theoretical perspectives, this study seeks not only to examine media's role in public discourse but also to advocate for holistic, child-centered social change.

Research Objectives

1. Assess the prevalence and socio-economic determinants of child labor in Multan.

2. Examine the role of media in raising awareness and mobilizing communities against child labor.

3. Analyze public and stakeholder awareness regarding laws and welfare programs.

4. Recommend integrated strategies for leveraging media in child labor elimination efforts.

Methodology

This study employed a **mixed-methods approach** to comprehensively investigate the role of media advocacy in addressing child labor in Multan. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, the research aimed to capture not only statistical trends but also the lived experiences and perceptions of various stakeholders involved in or affected by child labor.

Quantitative Phase

The quantitative component of the study involved the administration of **structured surveys** to a total of **60 respondents** selected from three key groups: parents of working children, small business owners who often employ child labor, and general community members. This diversity ensured a more representative understanding of public awareness, attitudes, and media exposure related to child labor.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the data, a **stratified random sampling technique** was employed. Multan was divided into specific strata based on geographical zones (e.g., urban center, peri-urban areas, industrial zones), and respondents were randomly selected from each stratum to avoid sampling bias and ensure proportional representation. The survey instrument comprised both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions focusing on respondents' perceptions of child labor, their exposure to media content on the issue, and their awareness of relevant laws and policies.

The collected data were analyzed using **descriptive statistical methods**, including frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-tabulations. These analyses helped identify patterns in awareness levels, media influence, and community engagement across different demographic groups.

Qualitative Phase

To complement the quantitative findings and explore deeper contextual insights, a qualitative phase was conducted involving **in-depth, semi-structured interviews**. A total of **12 participants** were purposively selected, including **local government officials, NGO workers, educators, and community leaders**—individuals with direct knowledge and experience related to child labor in the region.

Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that the selected participants had relevant expertise and could offer meaningful contributions to the research questions. The interviews were guided by open-ended questions focusing on institutional responses, the effectiveness of media campaigns, cultural attitudes, and challenges in child protection.

The qualitative data were subjected to **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This involved systematically coding the interview transcripts, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the data within the theoretical lens of Agenda Setting and Capability Approach. Key themes included the visibility of child labor in media discourse, societal normalization of child labor, gaps in law enforcement, and the role of community mobilization.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered strictly to ethical standards throughout both data collection phases. **Informed consent** was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the nature of the questions being asked. For illiterate participants, the consent process was conducted verbally in the local language.

Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all responses and ensuring that data were stored securely. All participation was entirely **voluntary**, and no monetary or material incentives were

offered to ensure unbiased responses. The study also took into consideration the **sensitive nature of child labor**, particularly when engaging with parents or employers, and took care to avoid any questions that could cause discomfort or legal concern.

Results

Table 1: Child Labor by Work Type and Associated Factors in Multan (N=60)

Type of Work	Poverty	Lack of Education	Inflation	Family Income	Family Occupation	Total
Crop harvesting	2	1	0	0	0	7
Picking fruits/vegetables	2	0	0	2	0	6
Glass/bangle making	0	0	2	0	0	5
Brick kiln work	0	0	0	3	6	9
Street vending	3	0	4	0	0	7
Working in hotels/servants	5	2	3	0	0	10
Total	12	3	9	5	6	60

Interpretation:

Poverty (20%) and family occupation (21.7%) are the leading causes. Lack of education and family income also contribute significantly. Child labor is most prevalent in brick kilns, hotels, agriculture, and street vending.

Table 2: Awareness of Welfare Programs among Parents and Owners

Program	Parents Aware	Owners Aware
Ehsaas Program	1	0
Tahafuz Program	0	0

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Kamyab Jawan Program	0	2
Child Protection Bureau	0	0
NCCWD	0	0

Interpretation:
Overall awareness is extremely low. Only one parent knew of the Ehsaas Program, and two owners had heard of Kamyab Jawan. No respondents were aware of the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau or the NCCWD.

Table 3: Awareness of Child Labor Laws among Parents and Owners

Group	Law Awareness (Number)
Parents	0
Owners	0

Interpretation:
There is a total lack of awareness about relevant child labor legislation among both parents and business owners in Multan.

Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the deeply rooted and multifactorial nature of child labor in Multan, where **poverty, limited access to education, and occupational dependence on informal labor sectors** intersect to create a persistent cycle of exploitation. Survey data and interviews alike reveal that economic necessity compels many families to involve their children in income-generating activities, often at the cost of their education, safety, and overall well-being. These findings are consistent with prior literature (Butt et al., 2020; Ahmad & Mustafa, 2019), affirming that child labor in urban Pakistani contexts is not merely an isolated social issue but a symptom of broader structural inequalities.

A significant gap revealed by the quantitative data is the **low level of awareness among stakeholders**—including parents, employers, and even community leaders—regarding **existing government welfare schemes, labor laws, and child protection policies**. Less than one-third of respondents could identify any formal mechanism in place to assist or protect working children. This finding suggests an urgent need for **enhanced outreach and public education**, especially in underprivileged areas of the city. Qualitative insights further confirmed that while some NGOs are active in advocacy and support services, their efforts often remain localized and underfunded, resulting in limited community penetration.

One of the most revealing aspects of this study is the **underutilization of media as an advocacy tool** in the fight against child labor. Respondents reported minimal exposure to targeted media content addressing child labor, and key informants noted that mainstream coverage of the issue

tends to be episodic—typically appearing only in the aftermath of major incidents or policy announcements. The absence of **consistent, strategic media engagement** has resulted in child labor remaining a peripheral issue in public discourse.

Applying **Agenda Setting Theory** to these findings underscores the critical potential of media to shift societal attention toward child labor as a national priority. When media consistently covers an issue, highlights its human impact, and connects it to broader social and policy concerns, it not only informs but also **shapes public perception and influences the political agenda** (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Multan, media campaigns that humanize the plight of working children—through **documentaries, interviews, grassroots storytelling, and social media engagement**—could play a pivotal role in mobilizing community support and pushing for stronger legislative enforcement. Moreover, involving local voices and tailoring content to the socio-cultural fabric of Multan would likely enhance message resonance and effectiveness (Hussain et al., 2020).

The **Capability Approach**, as articulated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides a complementary ethical and developmental framework for interpreting these results. This approach repositions child labor not merely as a labor market issue but as a **denial of children's basic human freedoms and opportunities**. The study's findings reinforce this conceptualization: working children are not only missing school but are also deprived of a safe, nurturing environment, access to healthcare, and the freedom to develop aspirations. As such, their ability to live lives they have reason to value is systematically curtailed (Sen, 1999; UNICEF, 2022).

Media, therefore, holds transformative potential—not just to expose injustice but to **reframe the conversation** around child labor as one of **capability deprivation**. Awareness campaigns can go beyond highlighting exploitation to emphasize what children lose: education, physical and mental health, agency, and future economic mobility. By doing so, media can foster empathy, galvanize community responsibility, and advocate for **policies that expand children's choices**, such as conditional cash transfer programs, subsidized education, and robust child protection systems.

In summary, the intersectional nature of the problem demands an equally multifaceted response. **Strategic media advocacy**, informed by Agenda Setting Theory, can bring child labor to the center of public discourse, while the **Capability Approach** provides a compelling justification for urgent reform—viewing every child as a rights-holder with untapped potential. Bridging the current awareness gap through localized, consistent, and emotionally resonant media messaging may prove a critical strategy in reducing child labor and promoting holistic child development in Multan.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several actionable recommendations emerge to address child labor in Multan more effectively. First, **media campaigns must be intensified** through collaborations between media houses and NGOs to create targeted, context-specific content that highlights the harsh realities of child labor. These campaigns should include real-life stories, raise awareness of legal protections, and offer clear calls to action for the public. Second, there is a need to **enhance government communication** about child labor laws and welfare programs by utilizing both traditional platforms like radio and television and digital channels such as social media. Third, **school outreach efforts should be expanded**, with dedicated media programs that promote school enrollment and retention, specifically addressing both boys and girls to ensure gender inclusivity. In addition, **strengthening media oversight** through the promotion of investigative journalism can help expose gaps in law enforcement and hold authorities accountable. Lastly, **community participation should be actively encouraged** by engaging local media, religious leaders, and

social influencers to challenge cultural acceptance of child labor and advocate for the value of education, ultimately reshaping social norms from within.

Limitations and Future Research
While this study provides valuable insights into the intersection of media advocacy and child labor in Multan, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size, though diverse, was relatively small and confined to one urban center, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study primarily focused on traditional forms of media, with less emphasis on digital platforms, which are increasingly influential among younger and urban populations.

Future research should aim to **evaluate the long-term impact of media interventions** on reducing child labor, particularly by tracking behavioral and policy changes over time. It is also essential to **investigate the role of social media and mobile technology** in reaching and engaging marginalized communities, especially in areas with limited access to conventional media. Moreover, **comparative studies involving other major cities**—such as Lahore, Karachi, or Faisalabad—would help assess regional differences and enhance the broader applicability of the findings. Expanding research in these areas can support the development of more effective, evidence-based strategies to combat child labor across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

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