

**Child labor : Analyzing the contributing factors,
impacts, and mitigation strategies in Southern
Shan State, Myanmar (2023-2024)**



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Abstract

Child labor is a cruel social issue that is becoming more prevalent worldwide, especially in Myanmar, and it has a big impact on the growth and well-being of young people. This study focuses on the frequency of child labor in Shan State during the period of continuing political unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. Although lots of global agreements and protocols, including national laws and conventions ratified by Myanmar, safeguard children's rights globally, there are still large gaps and restrictions. With this unreliable legal protection of child rights, the ongoing civil wars and the global pandemic created the degenerative existing child labor problem. The study aims to explore the contributing factors to child labor, the challenges faced by child workers, and the roles of collective effort in addressing this issue. By using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth/ semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, including child laborers, parents, NGO workers, and shop owners. The findings emphasize that family financial and livelihood situations, school closure, and social and cultural norms have forced many children into labor to support their families. Additionally, children have faced challenges like the need to work extra duties, physical and emotional damage, unfair treatment, and exploitation. It also emphasizes the importance of collective efforts involving parents, employers, NGOs, and government authorities to mitigate the prevalence of child labor. Recommendations include suggestions for following researchers and promoting awareness campaigns to challenge the social acceptance of child labor.

Keywords : Child Labor, Covid-19, 2021 Coup, Civil War, Myanmar, Cultural norms, education, social inequality, economic impacts, child rights



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1. Introduction

The involvement of children in the business sector and child laborers is a wicked social problem that is increasing globally, and it is a tragic issue in many countries, including Myanmar. The definition and scope of child labor vary under diverse social structures and traditions. However, the workers who are under the age of 18 and their respective working environments may thread or damage each individual physically, mentally, or morally, no matter whether voluntary or not; this can be hypothesized as child labor (Augustus, 2022). Aung (2019) stated, “The causes of child labor [in Myanmar] are primarily rooted in poverty created by social and economic inequality as well as in insufficient educational facilities” (p. 3).

Globally, almost 1 in 10 children, or 160 million, are involved in child labor. Among them, in Myanmar, approximately 1.1 million children who are between the ages of 5 and 17 are working as child laborers (Augustus, 2022). According to the statistics of the Myanmar Labor Force Survey, in 2015, over 1.1 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 were engaged in child labor, which means around half of the Myanmar children are laborers and work in unsafe and hazardous working environments (ILO, 2021). The number of children might have increased during the global COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing military coup and civil wars in Myanmar.

Globally, children's rights are protected by several conventions and protocols: the ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29), the ILO Minimum Age Convention (No. 138), the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182), and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (ILO, 2021). Among those international child rights conventions, Myanmar strengthened its commitment to take action regarding child labor by ratifying the CRC in 1991, the ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29) in 1930, and the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) in 2013, respectively (Aung, 2019). Moreover, Myanmar established the Factories Act of 1951, the Shop and Establishment Act of 1951, and the Child Law in 1993, which set laws and regulations to protect the rights of children (Thein, 2016). In recent years, Myanmar has modified, adopted, and established new laws and regulations regarding child rights: the new Child Rights Law in



2019, which replaced the 1993 one; the Factories Act in 2016, which amended the 1951 one; and the new Shops and Establishments Law in 2016, respectively (ILO, 2021).

Despite those major improvements in the national child rights sector, there remained significant challenges and limitations regarding the matter of child labor. The global wicked problem of child labor remains the main challenge in Myanmar. In Myanmar, the Child Rights Law is the core law to protect child rights, although it does not include any legal definitions regarding “child labor” (Thein, 2016). In her study, one of the respondents from the Ministry of Labour, Myanmar, stated, “The definitions of child labor, the worst form of child labor, and hazardous work are not provided in the Child Law and Labour Laws” (2016, p. 16). Thus, the current legal protection of child rights in Myanmar remains a weakness and an underestimation.

With this unreliable legal protection of child rights, the ongoing civil wars and the global pandemic created the degenerative existing child labor problem. The studies indicated that children between the ages of 6 and 17 are working various kinds of jobs (farms, factories, and industries; domestic works; construction; tea shops; and restaurants) for small wages (CRC Shadow Report, 2011). According to statistics from the ILO, among 1,228,000 active child laborers between the ages of 10 and 14 in 2000, Myanmar (The Global Slavery Index, 2014, as cited in Thein, 2016). Employers are more interested in child workers by virtue of lower wages than adult workers (Rieffel, 2012). The cheap salaries of the underage workers increased the number of child laborers as a result of poverty. However, Aung (2019) stated that poverty did not cause child labor alone. It needs to consider the social structure, natural and man-made disasters (civil wars), poor education systems, and traditions.

According to the JICA (2010), families from the southern and middle regions of Myanmar experienced several disasters, such as flooding, cyclones, and insecurity of food and water. Moreover, the over 60 years and the ongoing civil wars caused the families to relocate from their original residence to a new one. This makes the families' incomes insufficient and increases the involvement of the child in work. Many parents conclude that taking their children out of education and putting them to work is the most reasonable



solution when they face economic instability (Gootaert & Kanbur, 1995, p. 188). According to the press release from the World Bank (2022), about 40% of the population in Myanmar is living below the national poverty line.

Alongside poverty, the social structure and the traditions of Myanmar society also contributed to the problem of child labor. According to Kennedy (2019), “The problem of child labor is worse in Myanmar than nearly anywhere else in the world. Moreover, unlike in many other countries where this practice occurs, in Myanmar, child labor is conducted openly and is widely socially accepted” (p. 202). In Myanmar society, “older people always play a big role in decisions for younger people, rightly and wrongly. In fact, acceptance of difference is not commonly practiced in society at large” (Channaibanya, 2010, p. 5). Those social norms neglect the rights of the child and support the open notion of child labor in society.

The current studies and the statistics of Myanmar’s child labor sector indicate the need for a reliable and strong legal system that will protect children involved in dangerous working environments. Moreover, they also indicated that the child labor issue is a complicated, wicked social problem that intersects with various socio-political variables. Although almost all of the studies on child labor were conducted at the national level and mainly focused on the country’s urban areas, Since the issue of child labor is deeply related to other social, political, and economic issues, the situations and the contributors or root cases of child labor may vary in terms of different geographic locations and sizes of the sample. Moreover, that specific focus study might be useful to find a definite solution for that focused area. Therefore, this study aims to examine the contributing factors leading to child labor, explore the predominant challenges faced by children in their workplaces and their underlying causes, and analyze the roles of parents and local government authorities in mitigating child labor while proposing specific strategies for effective intervention.



2. Methodology

This study was conducted by two researchers with the aim to analyze the relationship between poverty and child labor. This research employed the qualitative approach which offers rich and insightful data. This research used purposive, stratified, and snowball sampling methods with a total of 11 participants, including 5 children who were involved in the workplace, 3 parents of child labor, 2 NGOs, and 1 shop owner.

The stratified sampling method ensured representation across different demographic categories such as age, gender, and socio-economic status. Researchers selected participants based on specific definitions and concepts relevant to the study. The focus was on children aged 5 to 17 years, as this age range is critical for examining the impact of labor. Participants were chosen based on their engagement in labor activities and socio-economic background. Additionally, the study found that the participants were predominantly divided by location, with 45% residing in urban areas and 55% in rural areas. Employment distribution among the participants varied, with 20% working in factories, 20% as babysitters, 40% in grocery stores, and 20% in phone shops.

Researchers used in-depth interview and semi-structured interview methods that allowed flexibility to explore emerging themes, while also enabling them to adapt questions based on participants' responses, leading to richer and more data for the study. In the interview guide, researchers included 24 questions, including background information of samples, divided into 4 interviewee types: children, parents, shop owners, and NGOs who are involved regarding the issue of child labour. The questions were designed to capture the changes experienced during two distinct periods: pre and post the occurrences of COVID-19 outbreak and the 2021 military coup.

The interviews for this research study were conducted with Zoom online platform and in-person interviews in April 2024. Informed consent was sent to research participants in advanced. For child participants, researchers created consent forms with clear and age-appropriate and took the consequences from children and related guardians by ensuring that they understood the study and were comfortable participating.

3. Finding and Discussion

Child labor remains a pressing global issue, particularly in Southern Shan State, where economic and social challenges prevail. This phenomenon severely impacts children's childhoods and educational opportunities, often exposing them to various forms of exploitation. To effectively combat child labor, it is crucial to understand the underlying factors driving this issue, the specific challenges faced by affected children, and the importance of targeted mitigation efforts.

3.1. Factors Driving Child Labor

This research revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing political instability have brought economic disruptions, affecting the livelihoods of many families in Southern Shan State, Myanmar. From the interview with our participants, they faced a lot of these disruptions which have led to widespread job losses, forcing families to adapt to unstable employment and also impacting their income sources.

According to the data we have collected, five families from interviewees have got stable incomes by working as chefs, waitresses, and government staff before 2021. They had exact work and income convenient for their livelihood such as food, house rent fees, healthcare, and school fees, and could also accumulate some savings. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the political situation brought significant economic disruption and led to job losses (stable employment). So, families had to adapt by finding other income such as selling green groceries and fried food and working as carpenters (without exact work and income).

Children need to enter the workforce to help cover their household expenses is one of the main reasons. Also, commodity prices increasing after Covide-19 are impact on many families livelihoods and financial situations. A girl who works in a grocery shop mentioned that:



“Before the COVID-19 pandemic, my family’s livelihood and financial situation were stable due to my father’s income. However, when my father passed away during the COVID-19 period, the whole family had to rely on my mother’s income as a farmer. But my mother earns money during harvest season and difficult in the growing season.”

The findings indicate that child labor is a complex issue driven by various factors, particularly family financial instability (poverty), school closures during pandemics and coups, and social and cultural norms. The family economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability forced many families into unstable employment, compelling children to contribute financially to their households and for their educational expenses.

According to the data from conducted interview, children need to contribute financially to their households due to parents facing unstable employment and income. One of the children from our participants said:

“My monthly salary helps my family's livelihood and also support my family members. I need to send my youngest brother to preschool which costs 30,000 MMK per month every month. Also, I need to pay school and tuition fees for my younger.”

Another significant factor driving children into the workforce has been the school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of political instability. The pandemic led to the temporary closure of schools, affecting a lot of children. One of the parents said that due to her children not continue their education, so she forced to entered to work to help support their households financial. Additionally, in some cultural norms, the education of girls continues to be deprioritized, girls are often the first to be pulled out of school to help domestic work or to contribute to the family income. Those are some of the reasons leading to higher rates of female child labor.

According to the interviews with parents and NGO workers, cultural beliefs have an important role in encouraging child labor. Parents and guardians believe that work has a



constructive effect on building and increasing skill development in children. It's common in such households for a child to learn the work from an early age by following in their parent's footsteps. Some guardians, including parents especially in rural areas, often perceive children who are involved in the workplace as a normal phenomenon and believe that working experiences help children understand the value of money. So, children may be expected to contribute to the family's livelihood from a young age. One of the parents said:

"If we didn't allow our children to do anything from a younger age, a lot of people from our community would say that, "Children cannot know how to work and they don't understand the value of money".

All the parents in our study conveyed their concern about societal perception if they didn't involve their children in work-related activities. They mentioned that the community tended to appreciate hardworking children as clever rather than pitying them. They also highlighted the perception of working in restaurants and shops as being perceived as light and safe. Furthermore, they discussed the lack of sexual health knowledge contributing to unplanned and irresponsible parenthood as an indirect factor contributing to the prevalence of child labor.

3.2. Challenges faced by Child labor

The research indicates that child laborers encounter a multitude of challenges, such as excessive duties leading to physical and emotional exhaustion, as well as unfair treatment including reduced wages, delayed payments, and exploitation through uncompensated overtime.

Through the interview, two children from our participants need to work various extra duties beyond their regular work such as washing, cooking, delivery services, and online selling in their workplace. Their physical energy is being drained by the additional workload, and they have no time for social activities, education, or leisure. One child from our participant shared; "In addition to taking care of my employer's child and grandmother, I needed to do a lot of their housework like washing clothes and cooking." Furthermore, another



participant who works in a cosmetic shop mentioned that she needs to sell not only in cosmetic shop but also in online platforms and work as a delivery in her free time. This participant's mother mentioned this situation "As much as she can sell, they don't pay a percentage, so she doesn't receive as much as she can."

This study also found that child laborers also face unfair treatment and exploitation challenges like reduced wages, delayed payments, and lack of compensation for overtime in their workplace which exacerbates their already difficult circumstances. Two children from our participants are forced to work overtime without receiving any additional compensation, and their salaries are often reduced or irregularly paid. According to the participants, children who enter the workforce are frequently required to work long hours, from early morning until late at night, without adequate breaks or rest periods. Furthermore, the participant expressed that if they need to take time off for personal matters, their wages are often reduced, creating an unfair and punitive system. Additionally, the participant reported that their monthly salary is not always paid on time and also if they do the same tasks and work the same hours as their adult counterparts, they often receive lower salaries. Additionally, they are often scolded and yelled at by their supervisors or other workers which is important for their physical and mental well-being.

Another one of the primary challenges faced by child laborers is causing physical and emotional damage. This study highlights that the spinal court injury due to carrying heavy loads. For this impact, a social worker who works for child issues mentioned that these injuries can result in lifelong disabilities, chronic pain, and a lot of health risks to the child's physical and mental well-being. On the other hand, children also face emotional damage due to the need to work long hours, stressful working conditions, and lack of access to education. These emotions can lead to a child's development, affecting their social, and psychological well-being. One of the participants highlighted the social isolation and exclusion faced by child workers. They expressed the feeling that their co-workers, who are often adults, do not take them seriously or include them in important discussions



because of their age. This lack of recognition can further compound the emotional and psychological challenges these children face.

Overall, child laborers face a multitude of challenges, including excessive workloads, physical and emotional damage, unfair treatment, and exploitation. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensuring the rights and well-being of these vulnerable children are protected.

3.3. Collective Effort to Mitigate Child Labor

This research observed that parents are very important and hold the primary responsibility for mitigating these issues. Parents can contribute by not forcing their children into work, carefully monitoring the workplace conditions their children engage in, and ensuring that their children only take on tasks that are age-appropriate and within their capacity. Another parent also advises that “You have to look carefully at your children's working conditions and problems.” Some parents have already taken action by disappointing their children from working and only allowing them to work in activities that they can handle without harm.

In addition, employees also play a vital role in reducing child labor by obeying labor laws (Child Law (1993) and Labor Organization Law (2011)), verifying the ages of young workers, and ensuring paid fairly and work under safe conditions. A shop owner from this research shared her perspective and suggestion that “I don’t violate the child labor law. The working child is also paid full salary. According to their ability, we should pay as much as they have done and ensure a safe and healthy environment for children”

Furthermore, a participants who work for child issues mention that “ Organizations like CBOs, NGOs and INGOs whose work for children are playing an important role in addressing child labor through giving advocacy, support directly, and collaboration with other stakeholders.” They also work on the ground by raising awareness and ensuring that children receive the support they need (humanitarian assistance). An NGO worker



who live in Taunggyi highlighted his and his group involvement in mitigated effort in child labor.

“As for group, in the past, we have dealt with issues related to security and the basic work for addressing children’s issues. Even if we don’t work directly as a team, there are helpers in places that deal with issues related to children. I joined campaigns related to children’s affairs.”

NGOs are also involved in advocating for systemic changes, such as the implementation of a compulsory education system, the reduction of poverty, and the creation of more employment opportunities for parents, which can indirectly reduce child labor.

In summary, mitigating child labor requires a collaborative approach, where all stakeholders including parents, shop owners, NGOs, and community organizations take responsibility for protecting children and supporting their development. By knowing the root causes and working together, it is possible to create a safer and more supportive environment for children, free from the risks and consequences of child labor and can lead to sustainable change.

4. Conclusion

Child labor in Myanmar is a complex issue involving economic instability, cultural norms, and legal protection failures. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated vulnerabilities, forcing families to rely on their children for financial support. Factors driving child labor include family financial crises, school closures, and societal expectations. The study highlights the need for stronger legal frameworks and community awareness to challenge child labor as a norm. Addressing child labor requires legal reforms, community education, and support systems for families facing economic hardship.



5. Recommendations

To understand deeply and address child labor effectively, future research should focus on the following concrete and specific areas;

1. **Broaden Participant Diversity:** Future studies should aim to include a wider range of participants to get a comprehensive view of the diverse factors influencing child labor.
2. **Investigate Effective Educational Strategies:** Research should examine the impact of educational programs to raise public awareness about the risks associated with child labor. Assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives can help inform strategies that enhance community understanding and promote stronger legal protections.
3. **Explore Collaborative Models:** Future investigations should evaluate successful collaborative efforts between NGOs, local communities, and government entities that have effectively mitigated child labor. Identifying best practices from these partnerships can provide valuable insights for scalable solutions.



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