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Scavenging for a Future: Work, Schooling, and Constrained Agency among Changer Gypsy Boys in Lahore

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ABSTRACT

This Qualitative study examines how boys from the Changer Gypsy community in Lahore, Pakistan, understand and negotiate the relationship between waste collection and formal schooling. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 14 boys approximately 8-15 years of age and a separate contextual interview with a community leader (L1), the study explores children's economic contributions, perceptions of schooling, occupational identities, household responsibilities, and future aspirations. Reflexive thematic analysis generated five interconnected themes; fluid and overlapping work arrangements; educational aspirations and the feasibility gap; constrained agency; and occupational reproduction and the limits of educational mobility. The findings show that children's work is multi-stranded rather that organized through a fixed contract-holder versus daily-wage dichotomy. Boys moved among family-based waste collection, daily-wage work, Phairi roaming collection, dumping-yard scavenging, and supplementary tailoring. Waste collection provided immediate income, practical competence, autonomy, and social responsibility, although some boys described it as physically painful and undesirable. Formal education was generally valued for its association with respectability and cleaner employment, but its delayed and uncertain returns were weighed against immediate household needs. The study argues that educational exclusion is produced through the interaction of economic necessity, occupational socialization, institutional inflexibility, and constrained agency. Effective responses require flexible schooling, household support, safer livelihood pathways, and recognition of children's existing knowledge without normalizing hazardous child labour.

Introduction

Across Europe and South Asia, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, nomadic, and semi-nomadic communities remain unevenly incorporated into national education systems. Educational exclusion is expressed not only through non-enrolment or early departure from school, but also through spatial separation, institutional mistrust, low expectations, curricular irrelevance, and the devaluation of minority lifeworlds. A systematic review of two decades of European research identified recurring representations of Roma education as a problem of absence, low achievement, socioeconomic disadvantage, cultural difference, invisibility, teacher competence, hostility, segregation, and inadequate policy. Roma were frequently framed either as victims or as problems, while structural sources of exclusion received less analytical attention than alleged cultural difference (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018). Research on Roma education likewise shows that exclusion may be reproduced through segregated and low-demanding schools, spatially concentrated

poverty, institutional arrangements, and the educational strategies available to families living in deprived localities (Nekorjak et al., 2011). Such scholarship cautions against treating educational marginality as an inherent attribute of minority communities and instead directs attention to the interaction between social position, institutional design, and historically sedimented relations of power.

Comparable concerns arise in South Asian research on de-notified, nomadic, pastoral, and semi-nomadic groups. Research in India identifies substantial educational barriers among de-notified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic communities and links educational attainment to socioeconomic conditions and unequal access to public institutions (Kannabiran et al., 2018). In Pakistan, studies of the Bakarwal and other nomadic communities describe tensions between mobile livelihoods and sedentary schooling system. Nomadic children encounter poverty, geographic remoteness, mobility, inadequate infrastructure, seasonal migration, and dependence on children's labour, even where community members value education (Baughn, 2018; Khan et al., 2025). The fixed temporal and spatial organization of formal schooling can therefore be poorly aligned with mobile or economically precarious lives. Flexible provision, including mobile or tent-based schools, has consequently been proposed as one response to the educational exclusion of nomadic children in Pakistan (Suliman et al., 2017).

This article examines these questions in relation to the Changer Gypsy community in Lahore, Pakistan. The community's principal livelihood is door-to-door waste collection and recycling, in which boys may participate alongside adult household members. The research emerged from sustained engagement with Changer settlements and non-formal education initiatives. Its central concern is the apparent disinterest or resistance toward formal schooling among boys involved in waste collection, understood not as a self-evident rejection of education but as a social phenomenon connected to livelihood identity, family decision-making and religious and cultural values.

In this setting, schooling competes with an activity that can generate immediate income, transmit practical knowledge, establish social competence, and contribute to household reproduction. At the same time, formal education may be associated with respectability, social mobility, and escape from physically demanding or stigmatized work. The resulting relationship is ambivalent rather than reducible to either educational aspiration or rejection.

Existing scholarships provides important explanations for educational exclusion, child labour, and nomadic marginality, but several questions remain insufficiently developed. Research on Roma and nomadic education has often emphasized institutional exclusion, parental attitudes, mobility, or cultural difference. Studies of child labour have generally examined household and individual determinants through quantitative models. Research on waste-picking has documented poverty, school dropout, and occupational health hazards, but has less frequently examined how children themselves interpret work as an economic contribution, a source of competence, or a possible identity, Qualitative research is therefore needed that treats working children as interpreters of their own circumstances while remaining attentive to the structural constraints within which their accounts are formed.

The Study asks: How do Changer Gypsy boys engaged in waste collection understand and negotiate the relationship between work and formal schooling? It further examines three related questions:

1. How do boys describe their economic contribution to household livelihoods?
2. How do they evaluate the perceived returns and opportunity costs of schooling?
3. How do household shocks, work arrangements, health risks, religious learning, and community expectations shape educational decisions and future aspirations?

The empirical focus is on boys approximately 8-15 years of age in Lahore. Their work was fluid and multi-stranded, encompassing family-based collection, daily-wage work, phairi roaming collection, dumping-yard scavenging, and supplementary tailoring. The article contributes to sociology in three respects. First, it shifts analysis from presumed cultural resistance to the practical and interpretive conditions under which schooling becomes difficult to pursue. Second, it foregrounds children's accounts of work, thereby complicating representations of working children as either passive victims or autonomous economic actors. Third, it shows why educational interventions must address the feasibility, timing, and material consequences of schooling rather than relying on the abstract proposition that education is intrinsically valuable.

Literature Review

Gypsy, Roma, and nomadic communities and educational marginalization

The literature on Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller education has increasingly challenged explanations that locate exclusion primarily in minority culture. A systematic review of European research identified nine recurrent problem representations: absence from school, academic achievement, cultural difference, invisibility, teacher competence, hostility, segregation, and misguided policy and action. Roma were commonly represented either as deficient subjects requiring intervention or as victims of exclusion, while structural and institutional mechanisms were comparatively underemphasized (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018). This observation is analytically important because the language of "disinterest" can reproduce the same problem representation. If non-attendance is read as evidence of cultural indifference, the economic organization of children's lives and the institutional limits of schooling may disappear from view.

Educational marginalization also operates through the organization of educational markets and school spaces. Research on Roma urban enclaves demonstrates how poverty and unemployment become concentrated in socially peripheral localities, while schools serving Roma communities may be spatially and institutionally separated from mainstream provision. These "Roma schools" are sustained through the interaction of spatial structure, policy and institutional strategies of Roma and non-Roma families (Nekorjak et al., 2011). Exclusion is therefore not simply a matter of whether families choose school. Choices are made within segmented educational systems in which available institutions may offer unequal quality, status, and future prospects.

The literature further documents the role of stigmatizing representations and inadequate policy. In Greece, Roma educational exclusion has been linked to the social construction of diversity as a threat and to state policies that fail to respond to harsh living conditions and institutional marginality (Parthenis & Fragoulis, 2016). In the Czech context, support programmes intended to assist Roma children may also carry exclusionary risks when they rely on stereotypical assumptions about Roma families or place children in differentiated educational tracks (Igarashi, 2005). Conversely, school-level support, including dedicated staff who mediate between families and institutions, can promote social inclusion and academic progress (Gould, 2017). Educational outcomes are thus shaped not only by family attitudes but also by the ways schools interpret and respond to minority children.

South Asian scholarship extends this critique by focusing on mobility, remoteness, and the incompatibility between nomadic livelihoods and sedentary schooling. Research on the Bakarwal community in northern Pakistan found that community members viewed education as intrinsically valuable while simultaneously identifying poverty and access as major obstacles (Baughn, 2018). Research in Swat similarly describes how child labour, customary practices, seasonal movement, limited infrastructure, and geographic isolation restrict educational participation among pastoral nomadic children. The same study reports interest in education that is portable, seasonally adaptable, and culturally compatible (Khan et al., 2025). Research on mobile tent schools in Malakand frames the problem as a structural contradiction between the mobility of nomadic life and the fixed organization of educational institutions, arguing for flexible and targeted provision (Suliman et al., 2017).

These studies are valuable but remain uneven in three respects. First, "nomadic communities" are often treated as a broad category despite considerable differences in livelihood, settlement, occupational organization, and internal economic stratification. Second, children's own interpretations are less visible than accounts from parents, teachers, policy actors, or community representatives. Third, the Pakistan literature has concentrated on pastoral or transhumant groups, leaving urban occupational communities whose livelihoods are organized around waste collection comparatively underexamined. The present study addresses this gap by examining how Changer boys interpret schooling from within an urban, marginalized, and intergenerational occupational economy.

Child labour and schooling in developing countries and Pakistan

Research on child labour has consistently emphasized that children's work and schooling are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive categories. The relationship is mediated by household resources, labour demand, school accessibility, direct and indirect schooling costs, parental education, household composition, and local infrastructure. Comparative South Asian evidence identifies recurring relationships among inequality, child labour participation, labour hours, and school attendance, while also showing that the effects of particular variables vary across countries and model specifications (Ray, 2001).

Evidence from Pakistan complicates that claim that poverty automatically produces child labour. Research using household data finds stronger support for poverty as a determinant of school non-enrolment than as a direct and uniform explanation of employment. Indirect indicators of deprivation, including inadequate housing, lack of electricity and sanitation, and limited household resources, are associated with an increase likelihood of child work. Household composition, the number of siblings, the

number of adult earners, and parental employment also shape whether children enter paid work rather than school (Hina, 2014). These findings support a relational understanding of poverty: children's labour is linked to the capacity of households to absorb the loss of their contribution, not solely to income measured at one point in time.

Schooling costs are especially significant when children participate in extra household labour. Research in rural Pakistan distinguishes intra-household work from labour market activity and finds that schooling costs are positively associated with extra household child labour, while intra-household child labour is less responsive to changes in those costs (Hazarika & Bedi, 2003). Reducing fees or improving physical access may therefore not, by itself, remove children from work. Where children's earnings or labour are integrated into household survival, school attendance carries an opportunity cost: time spent in school is time available for income generation.

The consequences of child labour extend beyond non-attendance. Evidence from Bangladesh and Pakistan shows a negative association between child labour and foundational reading and numeracy skills among children aged 12-14. The association is particularly pronounced for hazardous labour, while economic labour and intensive household labour are also negatively associated with foundational learning (Chudgar et al., 2022). Educational exclusion may therefore occur before formal dropout through irregular attendance, fatigue, missed instruction, and limited time for study.

At the same time, a narrow opposition between child labour and schooling can obscure children's differentiated experiences. Work may be compulsory, but it may also be understood as responsible, skilled, or socially meaningful. Conversely, schooling may be valued symbolically while remaining materially inaccessible. The central analytical problem is therefore not simply why children work instead of attending school, but how children and households access competing present and future claims on their time.

Waste collection, occupational identity, and health

Waste picking research provides a particularly relevant account of the relationship between informal labour, poverty, schooling, and bodily risk. Studies of children who collect waste paper describe street-based work as a full-day activity that can displace compulsory education. In one study, most participants were boys, many began working because of poverty, and many left school after several years while retaining uncertain future expectations (Keskinkılıç Kara, 2014). This literature establishes a broad association between waste collection and educational interruption but offers less insight into the meanings children attach to their work and the reasons schooling may appear unviable.

The occupational conditions of waste collection are also consequential. Research on waste-picking children in Bangalore describes children as contributors to, and in some cases major earners for, household income. The work involves sorting recyclable paper, plastic, metal, and glass from decomposing waste, often without protection for hands, feet, or breathing. Compared with other children living in slum conditions, waste-picking children in that study experienced higher incidences of gastrointestinal, dermatological, and respiratory illness, alongside nutritional deficiency (Dhruvarjan & Arkanath, 2000). Such evidence supports treating waste collection as hazardous labour rather than merely an informal livelihood.

Yet a health-risk framework, while essential, can produce an incomplete account if it portrays children exclusively as bodies exposed to danger. Waste collection may provide practical knowledge, social networks, autonomy, and a recognizable occupational role. In the Changer case, children participate in door-to-door collection and recycling within household livelihood systems, and their accounts illuminate competence, responsibility, pride, and economic contribution.

The literature also cautions against assuming that all waste-picking children occupy the same social or economic positions. Some may work within family arrangements, while others depend on daily wages, Phairi roaming collection, dumping-yard scavenging, or supplementary activities such as tailoring. These distinctions matter for schooling because the opportunity cost of attendance may differ across households and across days. Existing research has not sufficiently connected these internal differences to children's interpretations of schooling.

Theoretical framing: habitus, capabilities, and constrained agency

The study draws selectively on three complementary theoretical traditions: Bourdieu's concept of habitus and cultural capital, Sen's Capability approach, and scholarship on constrained agency and childhood work identity. These perspectives are not treated as interchangeable explanations. Rather, each illuminates a different dimension of the relationship between work and schooling.

Bourdieu's framework directs attention to the dispositions through which social worlds become familiar, valuable, and thinkable. Habitus refers to durable but not mechanically fixed orientations formed through social experience, while cultural capital concerns

valued knowledge, linguistic competencies, dispositions, and styles that receive recognition within particular fields. Research on Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of distinguishing habitus from the cultural capital and analysing both in relation to practice and field (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Educational institutions tend to reward cultural forms associated with socially powerful groups, giving children whose home experiences align with institutional expectations an advantage (Andersen & Hansen, 2011). From this perspective, Changer boys' practical Knowledge of routes, recycling, negotiation, and household responsibility may constitute meaningful competencies within their occupational field, even if schools do not recognize them as educational capitals.

A Bourdieuian approach must nevertheless avoid reducing minority practices to fixed culture. Research has criticized overly deterministic versions of social reproduction and argues that habitus contains both reproductive and transformative possibilities. Teachers and institutions can also draw on diverse forms of cultural capital rather than reproducing a single dominant standard (Mills, 2008). Moreover, cultural capital has limited explanatory power when treated narrowly as a universal mechanism of class reproduction across multicultural contexts (Tzanakis, 2011). The value of Bourdieu's concepts in this study therefore lies in examining how dispositions and forms of knowledge are produced and recognized, not in treating Changer identity as a stable cause of educational exclusion.

Sen's capability approach shifts the analytical question from whether schooling is formally available to whether children possess substantive opportunities to attend, learn, and convert education into valued futures. A boy may express a preference for schooling while lacking the resources, time, health, family circumstances, or institutional flexibility required to act on that preference. Educational aspiration and educational capability are therefore distinct.

Finally, constrained-agency and childhood-work perspectives help avoid a binary between coercion and choice. Children may make judgements, express preferences, acquire skills, and imagine alternative futures while operating within household dependence, labour-market insecurity, parental illness, occupational inheritance, and limited educational options. Work identity is approached not as evidence that children freely choose labour, but as a possible formation through which responsibility, competence, dignity, and adulthood are experienced.

Together, these frameworks connect three levels: the dispositions are valued knowledge produced through community and occupational life; the material conditions that determine whether schooling is genuinely feasible; and the active interpretations through which boys negotiate work and education.

Methodology

Study setting and research design

The qualitative study was conducted in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan, among 14 boys approximately 8-15 years of age from the Changer Gypsy community. The community's primary livelihood is door-to-door waste collection and recycling. The study examined how boys engaged in this work understand and negotiate the relationship between labour and formal schooling.

Semi-structured interviews were used to centre children's own accounts rather than imposing a predetermined explanatory model. Purposive sampling targeted boys actively engaged in household waste collection. Fourteen child interviews were retained for analysis. A separate interview with a community leader, identified as L1, was also conducted and analysed as a supplementary key-informant and contextual source. L1 was not counted among the 14 child participants.

The children's economic activity was not treated as a fixed occupational typology. Rather, their work was fluid, multi-stranded, and shaped by household arrangements, access to particular routes, and the availability of daily opportunities. Some boys worked through family-based collection arrangements serving a relatively fixed set of households; some worked for daily wages; some operated as phairi collectors, roaming in search of recyclable materials; and several combined more than one activity. One boy undertook phairi work on days when he was not employed as a daily-wage worker. Another combined dumping-yard scavenging with evening tailoring. A third collected wasted through a family arrangement but also undertook phairi work at weekends, while another worked in a tailoring shop in the evenings.

Ethics, data collection, and management

Written or verbal consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and age-appropriate verbal assent was obtained from each of the 14 child participants. Community endorsement was documented through L1. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could stop the interview at any point without consequence. Interviews were conducted in locations that

balanced privacy, child safeguarding, and the community norms. Procedures were in place to respond to distress or disclosures of harm.

Individual interviews followed child-appropriate semi-structured guides. They began with informal conversation to established rapport and proceeded through probes concerning work, schooling, household responsibilities, aspirations, and relevant social and cultural influences. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred language, audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis.

To protect confidentiality, the 14 child participants were assigned the codes C1-C14, while the community leader was identified separately as L1. No real names are used. Audio recordings, transcripts, and translated materials were stored on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team. Because the researcher had an organizational role connected to non-formal education provision, research participation was separated from service access and organizational decision-making.

Analysis and limitation

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Codes were developed inductively through repeated readings of the transcripts and subsequently grouped into higher-order themes organized around the study's three sub-questions. Counter-cases and divergent accounts were retained rather than subsumed into dominant patterns. Differences in children's working arrangements, including family-based collection, daily-wage work, phairi collection, dumping-yard scavenging, and supplementary tailoring, were explicitly coded and incorporated into the analysis.

The findings represent the 14 children's perceptions and interpretive framings, supplemented where indicated by L1's contextual account. They should not be read as objective household budgets or causal estimates of intervention effectiveness.

Three limitations require emphasis; participants' ages were approximate because they were based on self- or community-reported information. The study did not collect systematic household economic accounts. Accordingly, the analysis makes claims about recurring perceptions and meanings among the 14 interviewed boys rather than about precisely measured income, expenditure, or household dependency. L1's interview provided contextual information about community circumstances and educational provision but was not treated as evidence from an additional participant or as part of the child-participant sample.

Findings

Analysis of the 14 child interviews generated five interconnected themes. Across the interviews, work and formal education were not experiences as two equally available alternatives. Schooling was evaluated against immediate household obligations, occupational competence, family illness, health risks, and each child's position within a fluid local waste-collection economy. Education was generally associated with respectability, social recognition, and the possibility of cleaner employment, whereas waste collection offered immediate income, responsibility, autonomy, and practical competence. L1's interview reinforced and contextualized several of these patterns but was analysed separately from the children's accounts.

Work as livelihood, responsibility, and survival

The most consistent theme across the 14 child interviews was that waste collection was tied directly to household livelihood and, in some accounts, to the possibility of obtaining food. C1 stated, "*if I do not work, I will not get food,"* and explained that his earnings were handed to his father for household expenses. For him, working and eating were inseparable. C4 similarly described entering work after his father's health deteriorated, stating, *"I had to take responsibility for the family."* He expressed satisfaction at being able to fulfil that responsibility.

Parental illness was a recurrent mechanism through which responsibility shifted to children. C5 explained that work had initially been undertaken occasionally with his father but became "*the responsibility of our whole family"* after his father developed a heart condition. C8 reported that his father had developed breathing problems after years of waste work and that he had consequently begun working and handing his earnings to the household. He described himself as having had to "*shoulder the household responsibilities"* for the preceding year. C9 likewise reported that his earnings were used to prepare food and that household survival depended substantially on his income.

L1's separate key-informant account reinforced this interpretation: *"My whole family Is now dependent on my children, and we cannot survive without their income."* This statement is treated as contextual evidence concerning household dependence, not as an additional child-participant account. Within the children's interviews, labour was understood not merely as income-generating

activity but through a moral vocabulary of usefulness, obligation, and family membership. C6, for example, stated that he was "*truly happy"* to play an important role in supporting his family and fulfilling household responsibilities.

Fluid and overlapping work arrangements

The children's account did not support binary distinction between contact-holders and daily-wage or phairi workers. Instead, work was organized through overlapping arrangements that could change across days, locations, and household needs. Most boys participated in door-to-door collection and recycling, but their work could involve a family-managed set of households, daily-wage employment, phairi roaming collection, dumping-yard scavenging, or supplementary tailoring. Several boys moved between these activities rather than occupying one fixed position.

One boy undertook phairi work on days off from daily-wage employment. Another combined dumping-yard scavenging with evening tailoring, while a third collected under a family arrangement but also undertook phairi work at weekends. One participant worked in a tailoring shop in the evenings. These examples show that children's work was not defined by a single stable occupational identity. Rather, boys assembled livelihoods across several activities in response to the timing of available work, the organization of family labour, and the need to secure income.

The meaning of waste work nevertheless varied across these arrangements. Boys with relatively regular access to a collection route described greater control over their working time and a stronger sense of occupational autonomy. C3 stated, *"I can sit and rest at any time and do things according to how I want them to be done. Nobody can say anything to us."* C2 similarly described waste workers as "*our own bosses,"* able to work according to their own preferences. Occupational competence was acquired through family participation: C6 described moving from being guided by his father to making decisions independently with his brother, while C7 stated that he and his brothers had learned "*what to do, where to do it, and how to do it."*

By contrast, boys who depended more heavily on daily wages, roaming collection, or other insecure arrangements more often described work as exhausting and difficult to escape. C8 stated, "*There is nothing I enjoy about this work, I dislike it completely,"* While continuing because the household required his earnings and he knew no alternative occupation. C9 likewise said, "*There is nothing I like about this work,"* describing participation as a consequence of necessity and limited options.

These accounts do not establish a fixed division between autonomous and dependent workers. Rather, they show how degrees of security and control could vary within and across children's working lives. The same child could experience one form of work as relatively autonomous and another as burdensome or insecure, and could combine them within the same week.

Educational aspirations and the feasibility gap

The 14 children generally did not reject education as intrinsically valueless. Instead, they questioned whether formal schooling could generate sufficiently reliable returns to justify withdrawing from work that produced immediate income. C1 understood schooling as a route to employment and a *"Good way of living"* but perceived limited benefit where waste collection could generate greater earnings than some formal jobs. C2 similarly acknowledged that schooling might lead to a monthly salary but argued that waste collection could eventually produce more income without the time and expense associated with education.

Other accounts made the aspiration; feasibility gap explicit. C5 reported that he had enjoyed school and would attend if given the opportunity. He also stated that "*work causes pain in my hands and feet"* and associated schooling with "*respectable, clean work"*. C8 similarly said, *"if I were given the opportunity, I would surely choose to attend school, so that I could pursue clean and respectable work."* While recognizing that stopping work would leave the household unable to meet its expenses. C9 believed that education could have provided a better life and respectable employment, but explained that *"without my work my family would not have enough to eat"*. His aspiration to join the army was similarly constrained because, as he observed, *"that too requires education"*.

Openness to schooling was often conditional on institutional flexibility. C6 indicated that he would study if school took place after work, partly because he associated education with manners and dignity in social interaction. C3 expressed the same conditional position: "*if school were held at a time when I could attend, I would definitely go.*" These accounts suggest that the issue was not simply whether the boys valued education, but whether formal schooling could be reconciled with work schedules and household dependence.

L1's key informant account further challenges the interpretation that parents simply oppose formal schooling: "*No parent wants their child to continue in this profession."* He added that he would send his children to school if he had sufficient resources, while

explaining that his sons were needed for work during the same hours in which formal schools operated. Educational aspiration was therefore present, but its enactment was limited by household economics and the temporal organization of schooling.

Constrained agency rather than simple choice

The accounts of the 14 children reveal young people who actively interpreted their circumstances, compared work with schooling, evaluated occupational futures, and articulated preferences. Yet these interpretive and practical capacities operated within household dependence, parental illness, uncertain educational returns, health risks, and limited employment alternatives. Continued participation in waste collection consequently cannot be understood either as unrestricted choice or as the absence of agency.

The apparent contradictions in the children's accounts are central to this finding. A boy could value education while remaining unable to attend; dislike waste collection while defending the necessity of his participation; or regard one form of work as autonomous while undertaking another because it was the only available source of immediate income. C3 and C6 valued aspects of work while expressing conditional openness to schooling, whereas C8 and C9 desired cleaner employment but felt unable to withdraw from the labour on which their families depended.

Religious education was included among the contextual influences examined in the interviews, alongside household shocks and health risks. The central pattern emerging from the 14 children's accounts, however, concerns the interaction between immediate livelihood obligations and the uncertain future returns associated with formal schooling. Educational decision-making was therefore negotiated and constrained rather than reducible to a single cultural preference or individual attitude.

Occupational reproduction and the limits of educational mobility

Waste collection also functioned as a socialized occupational pathway. Through participation in family work, the boys acquired practical knowledge, networks, confidence, and skills that were immediately usable. C2 described learning the occupation from his father and advising others to work alongside their fathers so that they could become trained. C6 described the transition from supervised participation to independent management, while L1 associated work with the development of *"self-confidence, fearlessness, earning skills, and having no fear about future expenses."* L1's account is treated as contextual evidence concerning the perceived benefits of occupational participation rather than as data from an additional child participant.

This process creates a cycle in which competence and dependence reinforce one another. The longer boys remain in the occupation, the more capable and economically useful they become; the more useful their labour becomes, the more difficult it is for households to withdraw them from work. Occupational socialization thus contributes to educational exclusion even when formal education is valued. Because children's work is assembled across family-based collection, daily-wage labour, phairi collection, dumping-yard scavenging, and supplementary tailoring, this reproduction is not necessarily a simple inheritance of one occupation. It is the reproduction of a broader livelihood repertoire in which waste work remains a central and readily available form of economic participation.

At the same time, the interview with the 14 children, together with L1's contextual account, challenged the assumption that schooling automatically produces occupational mobility. L1 reported that educated members of the community continued working in waste collection or related activities and that none had secured government employment. The children also referred to educated relatives who remained in the same work or abandoned poorly paid employment. These observations weakened confidence in education's promised economic returns. Schooling retained symbolic value as a source of respectability and social recognition, but its capacity to guarantee secure employment appeared uncertain.

Discussion

The findings complicate a simple poverty-child-labour explanation. Household economic insecurity was clearly important: the 4 children described earnings as connected to food, parental illness, redistributed work to children, and the costs of withdrawing from employment were immediate. Nevertheless, poverty alone does not explain how the boys understood their work or why they evaluated schooling differently. Work could be experienced as necessary, exhausting, autonomous, meaningful, or socially inherited, depending partly on how children moved among family-based collection, dumping-yard scavenging, and supplementary tailoring.

This interpretation is consistent with research showing that schooling costs and child work in Pakistan are related in differentiated ways. Evidence from rural Pakistan indicates that reductions in schooling costs may have limited effects on extra-household child labour when children's work is directly embedded in household economic arrangements (Hazarika & Bedi, 2003). Similarly,

research on waste-picking children reports that poverty is a major reason for entering the occupation while also documenting aspirations for schooling and occupations such as policing or military service (Keskinkılıç Kara, 2014). The present study adds a qualitative account of how the 14 working boys themselves interpreted these tensions and demonstrates that their working arrangements were fluid rather than divided into two stable occupational groups.

The findings also resist a binary opposition between working children and children who value education. The boys did not uniformly reject schooling; rather, they assessed its delayed and uncertain returns against the immediate and visible returns of waste collection. This temporal as asymmetry is significant. Work produced income and household contribution in the present, whereas education promised a possible future improvement whose realization was uncertain. Existing research in Pakistan has likewise identified negative associations between child labour, especially hazardous economic activity, and foundational reading and numeracy skills (Chudgar et al., 2022). Yet educational exclusion cannot be addressed only be demonstrating schooling's long-term value. The immediate economic conditions that make school attendance costly must also be changed.

Sen's capability approach is useful for interpreting this aspiration-feasibility gap. The boys possessed aspirations, but aspirations did not necessarily constitute effective opportunities. C5, C8, and C9 could imagine education and respectable employment, yet household dependence on their labour restricted their substantive freedom to pursue those futures. The relevant question is therefore not simply whether schooling was formally available or whether children expressed a preference for it, but whether the 14 boys had the material and social capability to attend without jeopardizing household survival. L1's statement that parents would send their children to school if they had sufficient resources similarly indicates that formal preferences and feasible choice were distinct.

The findings also speak to Bourdieu's account of habitus, cultural capital, and social reproduction. The boys acquired occupational dispositions and practical knowledge through everyday participation in family work. Waste collection became familiar, intelligible, and in some cases a source of competence and autonomy. This does not mean that the boys lacked aspirations beyond the occupation. Rather, their aspirations were formed within a field in which waste work was immediately accessible and educational credentials did not reliably produce secure employment. Bourdieu-inspired scholarship emphasizes that habitus and cultural capital are most analytically productive when examined together with practice and field (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). The present evidence illustrates this relational process: occupational competence was recognized within the community, while the forms of knowledge and credentials rewarded by formal education and employment appeared less accessible and dependable.

This interpretation should not be reduced to deterministic reproduction. Bourdieu's concepts can also illuminate the possibility of transformation when institutions recognize diverse forms of knowledge and alter the conditions under which marginalized students participate (Mills, 2008). The boys' conditional willingness to attend school, particularly if timings were compatible with work, points toward such a possibility. Flexible education could create an institutional bridge between existing occupational commitments and alternative futures rather than treating community practices as evidence of cultural deficiency. Such an approach is also consistent with critiques of educational research that frame Roma and related communities primarily as problems or victims while underemphasizing structural exclusion (Lauritzen & Nodeland, 2018).

The findings have several implications for policy and practice. First, prohibition alone is unlikely to be sufficient and may intensify insecurity where children's earnings were indispensable. Policies that remove children from work without replacing lost household income risk making schooling materially impossible. Second, flexible, bridge-based, or otherwise adaptable schooling is necessary for children whose working schedules conflict with conventional school hours. Research on nomadic and mobile communities in Pakistan similarly identifies flexible, transportable, and culturally responsive forms of provision as important to educational inclusion (Khan et al., 2025; Suliman et al., 2017).

Third, educational interventions should be accompanied by household income support and credible pathways into safer and more stable employment. Reducing direct schooling costs may be insufficient where the principal cost is the loss of children's earnings. Skill-development pathways may be relevant for older boys already integrated into work, but they should offer demonstrable routes towards occupational alternatives whose returns are credible to families.

Finally, policy and practice should recognize the dignity and knowledge associated with waste work while addressing its hazards and constraints. Research on child waste-pickers documents elevated health risks associated with exposure to contaminated waste and inadequate protection (Dhruvarajan & Arkanath, 2000). Treating families only as passive victims may obscure the competence, responsibility, and occupational identity that boys attach to their work. Recognition of occupational dignity does not require

accepting hazardous child labour as inevitable; it provides a basis for designing interventions that expands options without denigrating the people whose present livelihoods make those options necessary.

Conclusion

This study examined how 14 boys engaged in household waste collection in Lahore's Changer Gypsy community understand and negotiate the relationship between work and formal schooling. Its central argument is that work and schooling constitute competing possibilities within a constrained social and economic environment, not a simple opposition between child labour and rejection of education. The separate interview with L1 provided supplementary contextual information and was not counted as part of the 14-child participant sample.

For many of the 14 boys, waste collection provided immediate income, food, responsibility, competence, and occupational identity. For others, including those moving between daily-wage work, phairi collection, dumping-yard scavenging, and supplementary tailoring, it was physical demanding and undesirable but difficult to abandon because their households depended on their earnings. Across these overlapping arrangements, education retained value as a possible route to respectability, cleaner employment, and a better future, even when its economic returns appeared delayed or uncertain.

The study's contribution lies in foregrounding the working boys' own interpretations while identifying socioeconomic differentiation within a marginalized occupational community. The children did not occupy two mutually exclusive livelihood categories. Instead, they moved among family-based collection, daily-wage work, phairi roaming collection, dumping-yard scavenging, and other income-generating activities. These fluid arrangements shaped the meanings they attached to work and schooling, as well as the degrees of security, autonomy, and household dependence available to them.

Given the small qualitative sample of 14 children, the study does not claim statistical generalizability. Its value lies in its interpretive account of how educational exclusion is produced through the interaction of economic necessity, occupational socialization, perceived educational returns, household shocks, and institutional inflexibility. L1's interview strengthens the contextual interpretation of these processes but does not alter the participant count or constitute part of the child-participant dataset.

The appropriate objective is consequently not merely to remove children from work, but to expand the range of viable futures available to them. Schooling can become a realistic alternative only when households can absorb the loss of children's earnings, educational arrangements accommodate existing constraints, and young people can see credible pathways from learning to secure and dignified work.

Ethical Considerations

Because the study involved minors discussing work, household income, religion, health, and educational exclusion, ethical safeguards were central to the research design. Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, and age-appropriate verbal assent was obtained from each participating boy. Participation was voluntary; children were informed that they could decline to answer or end the interview without consequence. Community endorsement was documented through L1, while interviews were conducted in settings balancing privacy, safeguarding, and community norms.

Pseudonyms and participant codes were used in place of names, and potentially identifying details were minimized. Audio recordings, transcripts, and translated materials were restored on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team. Procedures were established for responding to distress or disclosures of harm. Particular care was taken not to present children's accounts as objective measures of household income or as evidence of unlawful conduct.

Because the researcher had an organizational role connected to non-formal education provision, research participation was separated from service access and organizational decision-making. The study's purpose, confidentiality limits, voluntary nature, and institutional affiliation were explained clearly to reduce perceived pressure and distinguish research activity from routine community engagement.

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