

## **Stories from children of labour in Iran: Do universities have a social responsibility to help resolve the problems?**

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Despite technological advancements in engineering, medicine, agriculture, food, and health; we live in a global community of incidents, challenges, and crises, contrary to the hope of living in a 21st century utopia. Child labour can be seen as a malignant symptom for which policy-makers and senior authorities must take immediate and effective actions to help, although such persons may be scattered throughout a country's cities. Numerous public and private organisations provide different kinds of support for child labour victims, often with some good successes. However, universities and higher education institutions generally are not participants in providing practical guidance and help for outside organisations, either unintentionally or for purposes determined by their own campus-bound priorities, decisions, and policies. As a novel research to investigate the lives of children of labour, we administered a multiple case study with five children to obtain their feedback concerning their lives as well as their portrayal of today's society. Then, a purposive sample of researchers/scholars (N=98) provided views on best practices and immediate as well as long run solutions for improving status and life expectancy for children of labour.

### **Introduction**

Each society is governed based on the higher order policies in terms of the social welfare, health, education, insurance, and safety. However, there are numerous groups and communities of people who suffer from different shortages especially in terms of safety, education, health, and primary life prerequisites. Each country tries to work on its economic infrastructure to provide the maximum satisfaction for its members by increasing employment opportunities, life status, as well as hope and optimism towards near future. There might be some differences in terms of number and volume of challenges and crises for people between developed and developing countries; however, the reality is that none of the global leaders can claim that we have put an end to social problems. Child labour is also one of the main crises which is increasing in number in recent years, worldwide and in Iran. This can be seen especially during the last decade, where there is an increasing number of children on the streets as soon as business hours begin early in the morning until late at night.

David (1999, p. 111) investigated "the relationships between children, parents and the state in the context of changing global, social and family structures and policy developments, providing a case study of New Labour policies in Britain". Considering the importance of abolishing child labour, Woodhead (1999, p. 27) recruited children to explore their "occupational preferences and their views on work and school". There are some works which (in)directly investigate child labour (see, for instance, Sultana, 1993; Khan, 2003; Bhukuth, 2008; Haile & Haile, 2012; Mukhopadhaya, et al., 2012; Phillips, et al., 2014; Keshavarz Haddad, 2017; Batomen Kuimi, et al., 2018; Erdoğan & Uyan

Semerci, 2018; Hamenoo, et al., 2018; Burrone & Giannelli, 2020); however, the literature still shows deep gaps concerning children of labour, specifically with a focus on engaging with them to unearth their views, feedback and image based on their real-lived experience.

Here, we aim to voice these children's feelings towards the society in which they are living. Their expectations from the surrounding community as a child, the threats they experienced through their childhood, and the injustices they witness based on their own mentality as a child. At the moment, there are some organisations dependent on the government, municipalities, or even NGOs; however, the main premise of the current research is to engage universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) as their social responsibility role, in most cases, remains at the reports level: symposiums, debate sessions, as well as conference proceedings.

### **Research method (design, data collection, analysis)**

This study is a multiple case study as “the researcher[s] are studying multiple cases to understand the differences and the similarities between the cases” (Gustafsson, 2017, p. 3). Further, according to Stake (2006, p. vi) “[t]he cases have their stories to tell, and some of them are included in the multicase report, but the official interest is in the collection of these cases or in the phenomenon exhibited in those cases”.

It was not an easy to follow procedure to talk with these children in order to understand their views and feelings about “Being a child of labour” for this research. One of the keys for successful collaboration with these kids is to organise a friendly and non-frightening atmosphere to assure them that we are all citizens of the same city and live under the same rules and regulations. The other speed bumps in having a short talk with these children is that they have no trust to the surrounding community expect with those who they are working with throughout the day. They were also impatient, so it was not very easy to ask them for a short talk or walk. Moreover, the children of labour work in groups of three or four in specified districts; hence, if one does not join the rest for a few minutes, the others will find him/ her which might result in his/ her punishment which usually happens as oral harassment and violence.

Considering all the problems in finding potential children who are willing to collaborate with us in this research; we were successful to have a friendly talk with five children of labour who were enthusiastic to collaborate with the researchers. The study was conducted in Tehran (capital of Iran) for a period of five months (10 April 10 to 22 August 2021) and the five participants were working on the streets in the north of Tehran. Like all research participants (and even with much focus in this case), we assured the children that no identifying information will be shared in the research (recordings of their stories, their names, age, if they are living with parents or not). Their stories were translated from Persian into English for quotation purposes by the authors, but without adding pseudonyms. We also met with their parents to get their permission, to avoid any unwanted and unfavourable practice which might hurt children's emotions.

The other group of participants were academic staff and researchers affiliated with different universities in Tehran (Allameh Tabataba'i University, University of Tehran, Sharif University of Technology, Alzahra University, Shahbid Beheshti University, Tarbiat Modares University, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences). We purposively selected about 150 potential researchers to respond to our online survey, receiving 98 responses (63.5%).

Our participants were invited to provide both an "immediate response" and "long run effect" solutions with the collaboration of universities and higher education institutions to help government organisations concerned with "Children of labour". Respondents were given a brief introduction to the research purposes as well as the reason for inviting their participation. They were asked to give their feedback on the topics of "Roles and responsibilities" and "Social responsibilities" of universities and HEIs. Participants were informed about ethical issues and their rights that will be observed both during the research study and when the research results are disseminated online.

The selection of the participants was based on their recent research articles (in Persian or English) as well as their national projects (2015-2020) with a focus on social issues and the contributing role of universities and higher education institutions in successful management of societal challenges/ crises. It also needs to be highlighted that the participants were from Faculties of Educational Administration, Psychology, Management, Social Sciences, and Political Sciences. There were no specified questions to answer; rather, they were invited to provide the best practices and solutions as immediate as well as long-run remedies to help children of labour for a successful and happy current and future life. Finally, thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the collected data from both groups of participants.

## **Results:**

### **Phase One: Children of labour: Their voice and childhood portrayal of life**

#### **Feeling suppression**

One of the main threats to the society is that suppression in childhood leads to other numerous crises in the adulthood. Child labourers (Figure 1) are not treated well both within their own communities, members of family as well as by the surrounding society. In most cases, it seems we are used to co-live with and accept such a phenomenon as one of the drawbacks of the new era. There are numerous organisations (public and private) as well as governmental bodies who care about these issues; however, these children as well as their families still suffer from lack of all-inclusive support from the society. Further, we suffer from justification syndrome in our decision-making and policy-making, as in most cases, it leads to the provision of solutions for immediate results without any view of near or long future as well as the denial of an old and chronic problem, children of labour. Children need to be acknowledged, respected, heard, and treated based on all the needs

for their age. They need to feel and experience love, care, trust, and safety both within their families and the society. If these basic needs are suppressed and children are deprived of these affective factors, we will experience more aggressive behaviour as a reflection of such suppression in the near future.



Figure 1: Suppressed and exhausted child labourer

We see kids with their parents as they walk for shopping while I have no such feeling. My parents and I leave the house early in the morning. I have no contact with them till late at night.

I am sure kids in the cars feel cool in the summer and warm in the winter. I remember all day long trembling last winter.

I know how people feel about me! We see both hate and kindness. I found that age is important for people. A child at my age (8) receives more kindness as I think people care about children at my age.

I receive the same attention from my mom at home as other kids receive in their cars. It seems moms care more about their children. I do not know the reason. I pass all day long with a hope to see my mom again late at night. Though she might not be that much kind all nights, but I am sure that like all other kids, my mum cares about me.

The city is not that much kind. I do not know the reason why I must come to the streets every day. In some moments, it is impossible for me to stay on my feet in the autumn or winter; or when I leave the house with a bottle of water early at morning in the summer.

It is not a good feeling to see kids are smiling and laughing as they walk with their parents or are commuting in the cars. We laugh with my friends, but I know it is different from what I see on the streets.

I have no time to talk with my mum and dad. I notice that none of us have the energy to stay awake for a lovely talk at night.

### **Deprived of education**

Public education is provided free of charge for almost all people throughout the country. Further, there are some rules and regulations which provide support for children whose parents might avoid them participating in schools, as usually happens among the children of labour. As much as love, care, and kindness are important and vital for children's proper training for a successful life in the future; education also provides the food for thought and it must simultaneously be provided for the children. Learning the basics of reading and writing is only the very minimum when we highlight the importance of the education for children; it is also the power of thinking which develops from the earliest years of education till higher education. Learning how to argue, persuade, criticise, evaluate, dialogue, collaborate, and succeed to survive in society at large where divergent competent ideologies and beliefs are living together is also one of the main goals of education for children.

It is disappointing that the children had no clear idea about the education. In fact, it seems they are trained for success in what they are supposed to do on the streets (being stubborn and impudent, for instance). One of the interesting points which is highlighted in the participants' responses is that they were asked to work in places where there are no schools. It seems the parents do not like their children corresponding and talking with other children outside schools. Thinking about and learning to challenge the status quo as well as injustices and malpractices are empowerments from education which these parents (un)consciously know that students obtain in the schools. In this regard, they oblige the children to stay in overcrowded bazaars, streets, and crossroads. So, the children just see injustices and inequalities in the society without any power and opportunity to think about the reasons behind such unfair behaviours in society. Therefore, numerous questions and challenges remain unanswered in their minds. The other serious issue which must be considered is that none of them had any clear overview and idea about schooling and the importance of education. Learning to survive is their concern and no further view of the future can be seen in their ideals and words.

I do not know if you have noticed that there are no children like us where schools are located. We are obliged to stay on the streets where people are busy with their daily routine activities. It seems we are confined to be neglected. We are not seen in the busy streets and crossroads. I have no idea of being among students in the class. I have heard the name "student" but I do not have any feeling about that. I like to experience the

school environment, but as much as I remember I need to care about the needs of my family.

I can read and write as I was in the school for three years; however, I had to leave the school and work for my family. I do not know if school is good or bad, but what we see is that money is the main thing which people care about it. I see expensive luxurious cars and having one like those cars is my most dreams at night. I do not care about being in the school or not. I have learned that money brings respect.



Figure 2: Children of labour working in groups of two or three

Future is now. I cannot even think about the future as I am doing my best to meet my parent's needs and concerns. Those who go to school do not care about the life expenses.

I work for money. My parents work for money. Other four members of my family and I all work to survive. So, I have no idea of being in a school can help us to survive.

I like to be like other children who go to the school. I like to have no concern about life expenses. I do not like to be here.

### Experience of bullying

Children of labour - deprived of kindness, respect, parental dialogues, as well as education - are bombarded with aggressive behaviours, harsh dialogues, different kinds of harassment, and bullying. It usually happens among their childhood communities as they spend most of the day together on the streets and crossroads. Living without members of family and outside the school makes them as robots whose daily activities and routines are prescribed according to the world of the adults. They experience no childhood and transit to adulthood with a mind overloaded with numerous malpractices and aggressive behaviours. They grow up to succeed in unfair daily duels to get money by deception among their peers. Among all these negative irritating practices, we also witness bullying which happens with no parental care; so, they need to care about themselves.

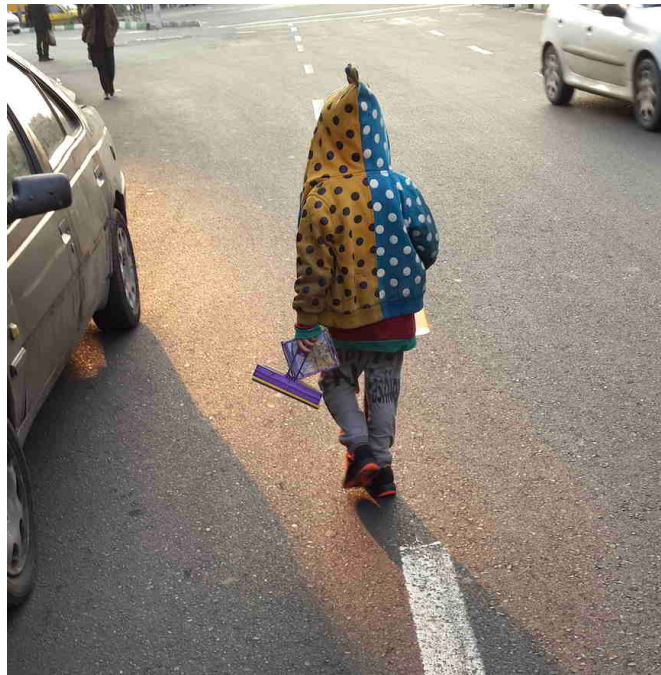


Figure 3: Experiencing violence and bullying on the streets

Usually we care about each other; however, in some cases bullying is inevitable.

We try to support each other if we are from the same family as you can see some of us are brother and sister. We love each other. We need to care about ourselves even if we receive no care and love from the society.

Bullying is like an entertainment for us. We try to watch those who are defeated.

Others try to calm us down if we are bullying each other. I mean people usually react to this kind of actions on the streets. Sometimes, we think we are ignored; however, when people (men or women) come to us for help, we find that we still matter.

Bullying also happens among children in schools; but, I remember that all members of the school or their parents immediately care about the children. We are left alone with no help from others if we are in a duel with those in our age or even those who are older than us.

## Phase Two: University responses: Solutions and best practices

In the 21st century when developed and developing countries announced numerous technological advances and progress in terms of diplomacy, economy, science and technology, we still suffer from lack of fair attention to those who are at the bottom of the pyramid of power in terms of financial and social status. Those whose voices are suppressed due to engagement with attaining very basic needs. There are numerous organisations in each country which provide immediate or longer term support to the children of labour as well as their families; however, the social responsibility role of the universities and higher education institutes (HEIs) is often ignored by the leadership teams of universities and are taken for granted by the authorities and policy-makers outside the campus.

Our participants from the universities and HEIs illuminated their views and commitment to the roles and responsibilities of the higher education sector. Based on their responses to our discerned categories, subjective weightings or rankings are presented in Table 1 for “roles and responsibilities” (first row) and “social responsibilities” (second row), that members of the leadership team ideally should provide to ensure fair support for the main stakeholders (society, students, staff, and faculty members) in their strategic plans. The average weighting discerned for “social responsibility” was 23%. Whilst there are limitations in this procedure, it can provide a helpful indication of current pressures as perceived by this study’s sample.

Table 1: Participants’ weighting of university and HEI roles and responsibilities (N=98)

Universities/ HEIs roles and responsibilities	Research collaboration (national and international)	58%
	Social responsibility	23%
	Teaching (academic)	10%
	Faculty members, employees, students	9%
Social responsibilities of universities and HEIs	Social crises (injustices, inequalities, increasing number of divorces, unpaid families, children of labour, unemployment, cheating, polygamy, suicide, poverty, etc.)	47%
	Social problems (lack of trust, deception, suppression of voices, etc.)	29%
	Social issues (climate change, citizens, civil rights, civil life, rights and values, etc.)	17%
	Covid-19 (current and future)	7%

In earlier times universities and HEIs were expected to focus on academic teaching for students to become highly educated members of society. More recently, research has become a growing responsibility; a new role expected to provide innovative and novel solutions based on their customers’ needs and orders (society, industry, etc.). Now, entrepreneurship universities are emerging worldwide as higher education policy-makers



obliged universities and HEIs to train entrepreneurs for successful career appointments after graduation. Training a new generation based on the principles and practices of academic teaching and research is not enough; rather, competent forces must be trained to be compatible with ever changing societies outside the campus. In this contemporary pattern (Table 1), universities and HEIs' researchers/ academic staff are allotting a larger part to research collaboration in (inter)national levels. In this area, we also have international collaborations between academic staff on joint research projects, recruiting international teaching staff, student mobility, and internationalisation of higher education. The main point is that the core of almost all research projects within national, regional, or global levels ought to be specified based on societal needs. Unfortunately, universities in the recent years are forgetting their main roles and duties; therefore, many or even most are engaged in a competition at global level, the ranking of universities. Almost all strategic plans as well as policies within the Iranian higher education sector tend to alignment with this simplified goal – increasing the status of the ranking and joining the ranks of top-tier universities.

Our participants also reconsidered aspects of teaching practices, as universities must be cautioned not to forget their primary role and duty which is teaching and training students with an optimum level of attention to their needs and societal needs, as well as available job markets for graduates outside the campus. The rights, voices, and values of the main stakeholders of the universities and HEIs (faculty members, employees, and students) could be accorded greater attention; with a view to improving upon the perspectives that underlie Table 1.

The next generation of universities are those with increased cares for their societies, accepting social responsibility as a new role assigned to the universities and HEIs. This responsibility tends to receive little attention from members of leadership teams as decisions and policies become more aligned with the measures and values of international ranking systems. We asked our participants to offer their views about the societal issues which universities and HEIs are obliged to face if social responsibility is highly valued goal (Table 1).

Considering the social responsibilities of the universities and HEIs; we asked our participants to propose solutions as well as best practices (as easy to follow and administer steps) to improve the quality of life for children of labour (Table 2).

Ramos-Monge, et al. (2019, p. 174) considered “the lack of engagement of university community [and] the insufficient communication into the university community” as some of the barriers to social responsibilities of the universities. In this regard, the members of our universities and HEIs are aware of their responsibilities as well as their commitment to the society for taking practical measures about child labour. Our universities have the power and authority to commence a nation-wide movement by researchers/ scholars to provide immediate practical help for children of labour and their families. This must be in alignment with the rules and regulations of the country as well as the fullest collaboration with public/ private organisations if total success is to be achieved in the short and long term. Mascarenhas, et al. (2020) illuminated that:

Table 2: Researchers' suggestions for children of labour: Solutions and best practices

Problems	Solutions	Explanatory notes on best practices
Housing	Allocation of dormitories (outside the campus) for children with homeless families.	Universities must make consortium based joint agreements to provide the best living conditions (no funding must be asked from the government). The immediate action must be returning families from suburban life to the city for short-term slots (2 or 3 years). It must be based on the priorities specified by the universities (for instance, those whose children are under age 12 or children living with one parent must be considered as the vital criteria).
	Temporary working conditions must be provided for the parents. It must be a condition in the outsourcing agreements.	Universities have different contracts with outside corporations (outsourcing); therefore, it must be considered as a term to identify and recruit parents for available temporary working positions.
Education	Recruitment of graduates for teaching.	
	Provision of teaching environment (on-campus or outside the campus)	On-campus teaching can happen after business working hours while outside the campus teaching happens during the working hours.
	Teaching happens (based on the national syllabi) with no certificate	Children of labour and their families must not expect formal education; in this regard, all teaching must happen based on the national syllabi and textbooks with no expectation to receive formal certificates.
	Vocational education must be the priority.	Training for a successful career in adulthood must be the priority in teaching children of labour; hence, vocational education must happen simultaneously with routine education.
	Scientific visits must be included in their curricula.	
	Totally free education must be provided for children of labour.	
Health	Universities for medical education must collaborate closely with other universities to provide the basics of medical cares as well as insurance for children of labour (as the first priority) and their families.	It must be noted that K-12 education is supervised by the Ministry of Education. Higher education (fields other than medicine) is supervised by the Ministry of Science, Research & Technology (MSRT); while medical education is under the control of Ministry of Health and Medical Education. In this regard, there should be close collaboration between the two ministries to provide the best health/ insurance conditions for the children of labour.
	Recruiting graduates from psychology and fields related to family therapy issues to provide continuous support for children as well as parents.	
	Social inclusion (especially for children) must be considered as	Children of labour are segregated from the society and are isolated from other children of the same age

Problems	Solutions	Explanatory notes on best practices
	one of the priorities by social as well as psychological researchers.	group.
	Medical students/ graduates must visit children and parents on a weekly basis as they suffer from lack of medical treatment, proper nutrition, and vitamins.	
	Counselling sessions/ meetings must be administered (in-person) for vulnerable children as well as those who experienced social, psychological, emotional, and physical traumas.	
Financial support	International collaborations and MOUs can be administered and signed with foreign counterparts to receive financial support from global agencies to support the costs and expenses.	
	Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) must be immediately formed by the members of the universities (academic staff, employees, students) to attract financial support from the members of the universities as well as charities throughout the city.	One key success to help children of labour is to avoid receiving financial support from the government as red tape and bureaucracies work as speed bumps which hinder the ease of working for universities.

... organisational investment in social and environmental issues improves employees' attitudes and behaviours, suggesting that organisations should consider their CSR-based programmes as part of their overall strategy to maximise the favourable attitudes of employees – and ultimately the returns from their investment in CSR [corporate social responsibility]. (p. 669)

According to Tauginienė and Pučėtaitė (2021, p. 2) “the university as predominantly public institution with a social mission and potential for social impact is a niche for deeper investigations of its social responsibility, both conceptually and empirically”. Therefore, our members of the leadership team at the universities and HEIs as well as the higher order authorities at the ministries are obliged to work extensively on social responsibilities as high priorities, to meet social needs and urgencies. In the same vein, Symaco and Tee (2019, p. 184) asserted that

The increasing discourse on social responsibilities of universities through the augmenting roles of among others, education for sustainable development, social empowerment and capacity building among communities are all highlighted in line with the aspiration to

create a higher education (HE) sector that is more inclusive, accountable and holistic. (p. 184)

Rahman, Castka and Love (2019, p. 916) also highlighted that “universities have a broader responsibility beyond teaching and research, a larger mission in human and social development to be socially responsible to local communities by strengthening relationships with and between constituents”.

## **Concluding remarks**

There are many relevant and necessary laws and regulations supporting children in general and children of labour specifically throughout the world as well as in our context of Iran. Also, numerous public/ private organisations, agencies, institutes, and charities collaborate closely with government authorities to provide the maximum support in this regard. However, still there are some failures in our caring programs and policies for children of labour, for which immediate actions must be taken both in terms of our decisions/ policies as well as how those rules, regulations, and policies are put into practice in the real context. Unfortunately, children of labour will comprise a large, under-represented group in the near future if we postpone immediate actions for short and long term results to help this group of children as future members of our societies. These children are rarely considered as the main participants in nation-wide research studies; hence, one of the novelties of the present research is that daily stories and clichéd activities of these children are considered as the main source of data to portray their real lived experiences within our societies.

Further, the social responsibility of the universities and HEIs have not been extensively explored within this realm of research; therefore, we asked researchers/ scholars to provide the best practices and solutions for immediate and long-run results to improve the quality of life for a large group of children. Results are extensively discussed throughout the text; however, as a final note it must be mentioned that universities / HEIs can help in this regard as they have the necessary power and authority especially concerning such a vital issue. Almost all researchers/ scholars believed that if their suggestions are put into practice within the context of their universities; other social groups and the public, in general, will join such a movement to eliminate one of the main social problems which will result in chronic major crises in the future.

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Research participants are completely aware of the research practice, its results, and more importantly that all their identifying information will not be shared with other researchers/ organisations and they will not also be sold for promotional purposes.

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