

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CHILD LABOR PREVENTION
STRATEGIES IN CHIWEMBE VILLAGE, MALAWI**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study assessed the effectiveness of child labor prevention strategies in Chiwembe Village, Malawi, examining community perceptions, lived experiences, and contextual factors influencing children's continued engagement in labor. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations involving children, parents, teachers, community leaders, and child protection actors. The study explored how existing interventions were understood, implemented, and experienced at the local level.

Findings indicated that child labor remains a pervasive social and developmental challenge in Chiwembe, with many children involved in market vending, household tasks, and other forms of work that compromise education, health, and psychosocial well-being. Participants highlighted recurring issues including fatigue, injuries, emotional stress, school absenteeism, and diminished self-esteem among working children. While awareness campaigns, community by-laws, and school-based initiatives had increased knowledge of children's rights, their effectiveness was constrained by weak law enforcement, inconsistent implementation, and limited resources. Consequently, child labor persisted despite ongoing prevention efforts.

The study concluded that meaningful progress in Chiwembe requires addressing the root causes of child labor, particularly poverty and cultural norms that normalize children's work. Effective prevention strategies should prioritize multi-sectoral collaboration, stronger community engagement, and sustained economic support for vulnerable households. Strengthening social safety nets, improving

monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and promoting alternative livelihood opportunities were identified as essential measures to ensure that children remain in school and experience safer, healthier, and more fulfilling childhoods.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the persistent challenges and significant opportunities in child labor prevention, emphasizing that interventions must go beyond simple awareness-raising to address structural, economic, and cultural factors, thereby fostering lasting protection and comprehensive development for children in rural Malawi.

Keywords: Child labor, Prevention strategies, Community perceptions, Rural children, Poverty, Education.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Child labor remains a significant challenge in many low- and middle-income countries, where poverty, limited access to education, and socio-cultural norms often compel children to engage in work that compromises their health, education, and overall well-being. Globally, millions of children are involved in labor, performing tasks ranging from household chores and market vending to hazardous work in agriculture, mining, and construction. The consequences of child labor are severe and long-term, including school absenteeism, physical injuries, emotional stress, and reduced self-esteem. These factors not only undermine children's development but also perpetuate cycles of poverty, limiting future opportunities.

In Malawi, child labor is particularly prevalent in rural areas, where economic vulnerability intersects with cultural practices that normalize children's

contribution to household livelihoods. Children often work in markets, fields, or domestic settings, sometimes at the expense of attending school. Despite the implementation of child labor prevention initiatives—such as awareness campaigns, school-based programs, and community by-laws—child labor persists, suggesting that knowledge of children's rights alone is insufficient to curb the practice. Weak law enforcement, limited resources, and inconsistent program implementation have been identified as barriers to effective intervention.

Context

Chiwembe Village, located in the Chikwawa District of southern Malawi, exemplifies the challenges faced by rural communities in addressing child labor. Households in the village often rely on the labor of children for subsistence farming, market vending, and domestic tasks. While community leaders, teachers, and child protection actors have attempted to implement strategies to prevent child labor, structural constraints such as poverty, limited educational resources, and entrenched cultural norms continue to influence children's engagement in work. Understanding the local context, including the perspectives of children, parents, and other stakeholders, is therefore critical for assessing the effectiveness of existing prevention strategies and identifying opportunities for meaningful intervention.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of child labor prevention strategies in Chiwembe Village by examining the experiences and perceptions of the local community. Specifically, the study seeks to:

- Identify the types and prevalence of child labor in Chiwembe Village.
- Explore community awareness and perceptions of child labor and

- existing prevention strategies.
- Examine the challenges and barriers to effective implementation of child labor prevention initiatives.
- Recommend contextually appropriate measures to enhance child protection and reduce harmful labor practices.

By focusing on the socio-economic, cultural, and structural factors that sustain child labor, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of local challenges and informs strategies that can effectively safeguard children's rights and well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review critically examines studies and scholarly works directly related to the objectives of this research. It provides an in-depth exploration of existing knowledge, theories, and empirical findings on child labor, its causes and consequences, and its impact on education (Basu & Van, 1998; Edmonds, 2007). The review draws on diverse sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, reports from international organizations, government publications, and program evaluations (ILO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Its aim is to situate the study within broader academic and policy discourses while identifying gaps and inconsistencies in current knowledge.

The review highlights challenges such as varying definitions of child labor, limited longitudinal data, and mixed evidence on the effectiveness of policy interventions (Fors, 2012; Ravallion & Wodon, 2000). Methodologically, it synthesizes approaches ranging from econometric analyses and case studies to participatory research, offering a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among socioeconomic factors, labor practices, educational outcomes, and community responses (Krueger, 2002; Beegle, Dehejia, & Gatti, 2009). The literature also supports the study's theoretical framework, drawing on human capital theory and rights-based approaches, and justifies

the research design, guiding the formulation of research questions and objectives (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004).

Child Labor and Preventive Strategies

The global struggle against child labor has received extensive attention from scholars, international organizations, and governments, rooted in human rights discourse and developmental economics. Key legal frameworks such as ILO Convention No. 138 (Minimum Age for Employment) and ILO Convention No. 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labor) provide normative baselines for countries to design child protection mechanisms, emphasizing both legal reform and systemic social change (ILO, 1999; 2000). Malawi has ratified both conventions and incorporated their provisions into national laws, including *the Employment Act (2000)* and *the Child Care, Protection and Justice Act (2010)*, which define minimum age thresholds, prohibit hazardous work, and outline mechanisms for child protection (Government of Malawi, 2017; Mwambene & Sloth-Nielsen, 2011). Scholars note, however, that legal instruments alone are insufficient without proper enforcement, and holistic strategies addressing root causes such as poverty and limited educational access are essential (Bourdillon et al., 2010).

Education-Based Interventions

Education is consistently highlighted as a protective factor against child labor. Malawi has implemented policies such as abolishing primary school fees and introducing school feeding programs, which have improved attendance, particularly among girls (UNICEF, 2020). Research shows strong correlations between educational incentives and reductions in child labor (Beegle, Dehejia, & Gatti, 2009). Nonetheless, systemic barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, high student-teacher ratios, and

poor rural infrastructure limit the effectiveness of these interventions (Chimombo, 2005; World Bank, 2018).

Community-Based Approaches

Community engagement is increasingly recognized as critical to child labor prevention. Involving local actors and cultural institutions enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of interventions (Boyden & Levison, 2000). In Malawi, Child Labor Committees and village protection groups play frontline roles in monitoring and addressing cases, while NGO-led sensitization campaigns help challenge social norms that condone child labor (ILO, 2017; Nieuwenhuys, 1996; Hecht, 1998).

Household Economic Support

Poverty is widely acknowledged as the most persistent structural driver of child labor (Basu & Van, 1998). Household-level economic support—through cash transfers, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), and livelihood programs—has been shown to reduce families' reliance on children's income and improve school attendance (ECLT Foundation, 2021; Edmonds & Schady, 2012). However, sustainability and scalability remain concerns in resource-constrained contexts (De Hoop & Rosati, 2014).

Synthesis and Gaps

The literature underscores the importance of multi-dimensional interventions that integrate legal, educational, community, and economic strategies. While international and national policies provide frameworks, their effectiveness is constrained by weak enforcement, structural inequalities, and persistent cultural norms. Significant gaps remain in longitudinal data, locally contextualized evaluations, and evidence on the long-term impact of combined

interventions. This review establishes a foundation for the present study, which seeks to examine the effectiveness of child labor prevention strategies in Chiwembe Village by incorporating local perspectives and contextual realities.

Child labor and impact of prevention strategies

Empirical studies from Malawi presented a complex and often contradictory picture regarding the effectiveness of child labor prevention strategies. While some interventions yielded encouraging outcomes, their long-term impact tended to be uneven and deeply contextdependent, influenced by a confluence of social, economic, and institutional dynamics.

For instance, *Musa et al. (2020)* conducted a study in southern Malawi that evaluated schoolbased interventions such as the provision of learning materials, awareness campaigns, and community engagement through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs).

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed to examine preventive strategies against child labor in Chiwembe Village, Malawi. It details the research design, study setting, target population, sampling techniques, sample size, data collection instruments, data analysis procedures, pilot study, ethical considerations, and study limitations. The chapter ensures that the study's findings are methodologically sound and applicable for policy development and community-based interventions.

Research Design

A research design is a framework that guides the collection, analysis, and interpretation of

data (*Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019*). This study adopted a qualitative approach to comprehensively explore child labor prevention strategies. The qualitative design allowed for in- depth examination of policy frameworks, stakeholder perceptions, and the lived experiences of children, parents, teachers, and community leaders. This approach prioritized meaning, context, and depth, enabling a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in Chiwembe Village, located in Ntchisi District, Central Malawi. This rural community was purposefully selected due to its high prevalence of child labor, particularly in domestic work. Economic challenges, limited educational access, and widespread poverty make child labor a coping mechanism for many households. Children in Chiwembe often engage in physically demanding tasks such as fetching water, collecting firewood, assisting in household businesses, and market vending, frequently at the expense of schooling and well-being.

The village offered practical advantages for data collection, including accessibility and the presence of knowledgeable local stakeholders (village leaders, teachers, NGOs, and parents). Focusing on Chiwembe enabled the study to generate contextually grounded insights applicable to broader policy interventions targeting similar rural communities.

Target Population

The study targeted individuals and groups directly connected to child labor, either through personal experience or involvement in prevention. These participants were considered knowledge holders whose perspectives were essential for understanding the complex social,

economic, and cultural dimensions of child labor.

The population included

- Children aged 5–17 engaged in or withdrawn from child labor, particularly domestic work. Their perspectives provided first-hand accounts of daily realities, coping mechanisms, and aspirations.
- Parents and caregivers, whose decisions reflect household economic pressures, social norms, and attitudes toward education and child labor.
- NGO representatives working in child protection, education, and labor prevention, who provided insight into intervention strategies and operational challenges.
- Teachers and school administrators, offering perspectives on school-based responses, student attendance, and reintegration efforts.
- Community leaders and local authorities, including elders and religious figures, who addressed cultural norms, informal practices, and enforcement of child protection laws.

Sampling Methods

The study employed a combination of purposive and random sampling. Purposive sampling ensured that participants with direct experience or involvement in child labor were included, while random sampling within this population helped reduce selection bias and enhance representativeness (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

The sampling frame included children aged 5–17, parents or guardians, NGO staff, teachers, and community leaders. From this frame, 10 children were randomly selected

for interviews or focus groups, alongside proportional representation from other stakeholder groups.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- **Inclusion:** Children aged 5–17 engaged in or withdrawn from child labor, parents/guardians of such children, and stakeholders involved in child protection.
- **Exclusion:** Children under 5 or over 17, and stakeholders with no direct or indirect involvement in child labor issues.

Sample Size

A total of 20 participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity across stakeholder groups:

- 5 children from different schools (currently or formerly involved in labor)
- 5 teachers providing insight on education and student well-being
- 5 school leaders offering institutional perspectives on interventions
- 5 community leaders addressing cultural and socio-economic contexts

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved transcribing interviews and FGDs, coding responses, and identifying key patterns and themes. This process enabled the researcher to systematically interpret qualitative data, linking findings to study objectives and theoretical frameworks.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted with a small subset of participants to test the clarity, appropriateness, and reliability of interview guides and participatory activities. Feedback from the pilot informed minor revisions to ensure questions were culturally sensitive and understandable.

RESULTS

It presents the findings from the study examining the effectiveness of child labor prevention strategies in Chiwembe Village, Malawi. The results are organized around key themes derived from the research objectives, including the types and prevalence of child labor, community perceptions, awareness of interventions, challenges in implementation, and suggested strategies for improvement. Findings are based on interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participatory activities with children, parents, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders.

Prevalence and Types of Child Labor in Chiwembe Village

The findings of the study indicate that child labor remains highly prevalent in Chiwembe Village, despite the presence of various child labor prevention strategies implemented by government and non-governmental stakeholders. The majority of children involved in labor activities were of school-going age, ranging from 7 to 17 years, and many combined work with schooling, while others had dropped out entirely.

Data collected from households, community leaders, teachers, and children revealed that child labor manifests in several forms, most of which are economically motivated and rooted in household poverty, food insecurity, and cultural expectations. These labor activities significantly interfere with children's educational attainment, physical

health, and psychosocial well-being.

Types of Child Labor and Level of Involvement

The study identified four dominant forms of child labor in Chiwembe Village: market vending, domestic chores, agricultural work, and informal businesses. presents the approximate number of children involved in each category.

- The findings show that children are involved in various forms of labor with significant impacts on their wellbeing and education. Agricultural work involved the largest number of children (approximately 75), with tasks such as planting, weeding, harvesting, and herding livestock. This work is physically demanding and often coincides with the school term, leading to frequent absenteeism and school dropout. Domestic chores were also common, involving about 60 children, and included activities such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water, childcare, and collecting firewood; when excessive, these chores caused fatigue, reduced study time, and poor school performance.
- Market vending engaged approximately 45 children, who sold vegetables, fish, fruits, and other small goods in local markets. This exposed them to unsafe environments and exploitation while contributing to school absenteeism. Lastly, informal business activities, involving around 30 children, included bicycle repairing, brick molding, charcoal selling, and assisting in small shops; these activities often required long working hours and exposed children to hazardous conditions.

Note: Some children were involved in more than one form of labor.

Agricultural Work as the Most Prevalent

Form of Child Labor

Among the identified forms of child labor, agricultural work was the most prevalent, involving approximately 75 children. This was largely attributed to Chiwembe Village's dependence on subsistence farming as the main source of livelihood. Children were frequently required to assist their families during peak farming seasons, particularly in maize and tobacco production.

The study found that children engaged in agricultural work often missed school during planting and harvesting periods. Teachers reported a noticeable decline in attendance and academic performance during these seasons. Additionally, children involved in farm labor reported experiencing physical strain, injuries from farm tools, and exposure to harsh weather conditions.

Domestic Chores and Gender Dimensions of Child Labor

Domestic chores were the second most common form of child labor, with approximately 60 children involved. The findings revealed a gendered pattern, where girls were more likely than boys to engage in intensive household chores. These included cooking, cleaning, fetching water from distant sources, and caring for younger siblings.

Although domestic work is often socially accepted, the study found that excessive domestic responsibilities negatively affected children's education, particularly for girls. Many girls reported being too tired to complete homework or attend school regularly. In some cases, domestic labor contributed to late school enrollment and early dropout.

Market Vending and Informal Businesses

Market vending involved approximately 45 children, many of whom worked before or after school hours and on weekends. Children sold agricultural produce and household goods to supplement family income. While some parents viewed this work as light and beneficial, the study revealed that it frequently resulted in long working hours and exposure to verbal abuse, theft, and exploitation.

Informal businesses accounted for the lowest number of children involved (approximately 30), yet posed significant risks. Activities such as brick molding and charcoal selling were found to be hazardous, exposing children to injuries, smoke inhalation, and physically demanding tasks. Children involved in informal businesses were more likely to be out of school compared to those engaged in other forms of labor.

Impact of Child Labor on Education

The study established a strong relationship between child labor and poor educational outcomes. Many working children reported irregular attendance, inability to concentrate in class, and poor academic performance. Teachers confirmed that child labor was a major contributor to absenteeism and dropout rates in Chiwembe Village.

Children who combined school with labor expressed feelings of stress, exhaustion, and lack of motivation. In severe cases, economic pressure forced some children to abandon school entirely to support household income.

Psychosocial and Health Implications

Beyond education, child labor was found to have adverse effects on children's physical health and psychosocial well-being. Children engaged in heavy labor reported frequent illnesses, body pains, and injuries.

Psychologically, many children expressed feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and social exclusion, particularly those who were unable to attend school regularly.

Summary of Key Findings

Overall, the results demonstrate that child labor remains a persistent challenge in Chiembe Village, despite existing prevention strategies. Agricultural work and domestic chores are the most common forms, while informal businesses pose the greatest health risks. Poverty, household labor demands, and limited enforcement of child labor laws were identified as key drivers sustaining the practice.

DISCUSSION

Overview of Key Findings

This study assessed the effectiveness of child labor prevention strategies in Chiembe Village, Malawi, with a particular focus on the prevalence and types of child labor. The findings reveal that child labor remains widespread, with many children engaged in agricultural work, domestic chores, market vending, and informal businesses. Despite the presence of national laws and community-based interventions aimed at preventing child labor, these strategies have not sufficiently reduced children's involvement in labor activities, particularly those that interfere with schooling, health, and psychosocial well-being.

The persistence of child labor in Chiembe Village underscores the complex interaction between poverty, cultural norms, household labor demands, and limited enforcement of child protection policies. These findings are consistent with broader research indicating that child labor in rural Malawi remains a significant challenge, especially in

agriculturally dependent communities.

Prevalence of Child Labor in Relation to Existing Literature

The high prevalence of child labor observed in this study aligns with findings from previous studies conducted in Malawi and other Sub-Saharan African countries. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), agriculture remains the largest employer of child laborers in low-income rural settings. Similarly, studies by UNICEF and the Malawi National Statistical Office have reported that children in rural areas are more likely to engage in labor due to household poverty and reliance on subsistence farming.

The dominance of agricultural labor in Chiembe Village reflects national trends, where children are often expected to contribute to family farming activities, especially during peak agricultural seasons. Existing literature suggests that while some agricultural tasks may be considered light work, the frequency, duration, and intensity of such labor often violate child labor regulations and negatively affect school attendance and performance. The current study reinforces this argument by demonstrating a strong link between agricultural labor and school absenteeism.

Domestic Chores and Gendered Dimensions of Child Labor

The study found that domestic chores constitute a significant portion of child labor, particularly among girls. This finding is consistent with existing literature that highlights the gendered nature of child labor, where girls are disproportionately burdened with household responsibilities. Research conducted in Malawi and neighboring countries indicates that cultural expectations often assign caregiving and domestic tasks

to girls, limiting their educational opportunities.

While domestic work is frequently normalized and overlooked in child labor discussions, the results of this study suggest that excessive domestic chores can be just as detrimental as paid labor. Similar studies have found that girls engaged in heavy domestic work experience fatigue, reduced study time, and higher dropout rates. The findings therefore support calls in the literature for child labor prevention strategies to explicitly address unpaid domestic work.

Market Vending and Informal Sector Work

The involvement of children in market vending and informal businesses observed in Chiwembe Village reflects patterns documented in urban and peri-urban areas of Malawi. Existing literature suggests that informal sector work is often viewed by parents as a survival strategy in the absence of stable income sources. However, studies by the ILO have warned that such activities expose children to economic exploitation, unsafe environments, and long working hours.

The present study's findings support these concerns, as children involved in informal businesses reported higher exposure to physical risks and a greater likelihood of school dropout. This reinforces existing arguments that informal sector work, though sometimes perceived as skill-building, often undermines children's long-term development.

Impact of Child Labor on Education

The negative impact of child labor on education identified in this study is widely supported by existing research. Numerous studies have established a strong correlation

between child labor and poor educational outcomes, including irregular attendance, low academic performance, and early school dropout. In Malawi, free primary education has improved enrollment rates, but child labor continues to undermine retention and completion rates, particularly in rural communities.

The findings suggest that child labor prevention strategies in Chiwembe Village have not adequately addressed the economic pressures that force children to work, thereby limiting the effectiveness of education-focused interventions. This supports existing literature that emphasizes the need for integrated approaches combining education, social protection, and livelihood support for families.

Health and Psychosocial Implications

Consistent with previous studies, this research found that child labor has adverse effects on children's physical health and psychosocial well-being. Children engaged in heavy labor reported fatigue, injuries, and stress, echoing findings from ILO and UNICEF studies that document the harmful consequences of child labor on child development.

Psychosocial effects such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and social exclusion have been widely reported in the literature, particularly among children who are unable to attend school regularly. The findings from Chiwembe Village reinforce the argument that child labor is not only an economic issue but also a child rights and public health concern.

Effectiveness of Child Labor Prevention Strategies

The continued prevalence of child labor in Chiwembe Village raises important questions about the effectiveness of existing

prevention strategies. While policies such as the Malawi Employment Act and community sensitization programs exist, the findings suggest that implementation and enforcement remain weak. Similar conclusions have been drawn in previous studies, which point to limited resources, inadequate monitoring, and lack of coordination among stakeholders as major barriers.

CONCLUSION

This assessment examined the effectiveness of child labor prevention strategies in Chiembe Village, Malawi, with the aim of understanding how existing interventions address the root causes, forms, and persistence of child labor within the local context. Overall, the findings indicate that while notable efforts have been made by government institutions, non-governmental organizations, schools, and community structures, the effectiveness of these strategies remains mixed and uneven.

The study found that awareness-raising initiatives and community sensitization programs have contributed positively to changing attitudes toward child labor, particularly by increasing recognition of children's rights and the long-term value of education. The presence of community child protection committees and collaboration with local leaders has strengthened reporting mechanisms and encouraged community ownership of child labor prevention. School-based interventions, including enrollment drives and school feeding programs, have also played a critical role in improving school attendance and reducing children's exposure to hazardous work during school hours.

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