

Causes, consequences, and mitigation of child labor in Ethiopia's coffee value chain

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Abstract

Background

Child labor in Ethiopia's coffee value chain remains a pressing challenge, depriving children of education and exposing them to hazardous work. Despite Ethiopia's ratification of international conventions and adoption of national policies, enforcement gaps and cultural norms perpetuate the problem.

Objective

The objective of the study is to explore the causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies of child labor in Ethiopia's coffee value chain through a participatory human rights framework.

Methods

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design grounded in a participatory human rights framework. Data were collected through desk reviews, consultative workshops, 30 key informant interviews, and 4 focus group discussions with stakeholders including government agencies, NGOs, cooperatives, and farming communities.

Results

Findings reveal that child labor is widespread, particularly in southwestern and central Ethiopia, with children engaged across all stages of coffee production – from planting and weeding to harvesting, sorting, and processing. Seasonal labor demands exacerbate school absenteeism, while poverty and household reliance on family labor sustain the practice. Although awareness campaigns, cooperative certification, and NGO-led training have improved attitudes in some areas, interventions remain fragmented and uneven.

Conclusions

The study underscores the need for coordinated, context-specific strategies that integrate legal enforcement, education access, social protection, and livelihood diversification. Addressing child labor in Ethiopia's coffee sector is critical not only for safeguarding children's rights but also for ensuring sustainable development and compliance with global ethical sourcing standards.

Introduction

Child labor in Ethiopia, and particularly within the coffee sector, presents a complex and urgent challenge that deprives children of their childhood, education, and prospects while exposing them to hazardous conditions, health risks, and exploitation [1]. Globally, about 160 million children (roughly 10% of the world's child population) are in child labor, with a striking 79 million of them in hazardous work [2]. Africa shows the highest regional shares, and Sub-Saharan Africa reports alarmingly high prevalence (29% of children aged 5–17) compared with other regions [1–4]. In Ethiopia, the patterns are stark: approximately

90% of working children are engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, with coffee emerging as a dominant but precarious cash crop; most work is unpaid family labor, and a significant portion occurs in hazardous conditions [5, 6]. Rural households drive much of this labor as a coping mechanism to shore up livelihoods, with seasonal spikes in demand that intensify school absenteeism and reduce educational attainment [6]. In Oromia and other coffee-growing areas, child participation in the value chain is extensive and interwoven with household income, schooling, and community dynamics, underscoring the need for context-specific interventions rather than one-size-fits-all policy solutions [7].

Beyond immediate labor in fields and farms, child labor reflects deeper structural and contextual drivers: poverty, economic vulnerability, price volatility, and limited access to quality education; cultural norms that normalize early work; and the informal, often opaque, supply chains that obscure monitoring and enforcement [4, 5, 8–11]. The coffee value chain, characterized by smallholders, aggregators, exporters, and retailers, amplifies power imbalances, with intermediaries shaping labor practices and farm-gate pricing. The cost of noncompliance with international expectations for ethical sourcing, traceability, and labor standards, such as the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), adds both pressure and incentive to address child labor, yet regulatory gaps, weak enforcement, and uneven regional capacity impede progress. In Ethiopia, a lack of a comprehensive, sector-specific national strategy for child labor coordination across actors complicates efforts to translate policy commitments into concrete protections for children [6, 10, 12, 13].

The consequences of inaction are profound: interruptions to education, health risks from hazardous work, and long-term impacts on productivity and development goals. The situation is further complicated by regional disparities in infrastructure, education, social protection, and market access, which require context-responsive solutions that engage households, communities, and local governance mechanisms. Although international commitments and national laws prohibit exploitative child labor and set minimum ages, enforcement remains weak, and monitoring systems are insufficient to safeguard vulnerable children across Ethiopia's rural, coffee-producing areas [14–21].

Ultimately, addressing child labor in Ethiopia's coffee sector demands a coordinated, data-driven approach that strengthens enforcement and social protection, expands education, diversifies rural livelihoods, and promotes gender-inclusive participation. Against this background, this study aimed to engage multiple stakeholders to gather their insights on the causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies of child labor in the Ethiopian coffee value chain.

Materials and methods

Study design

This study was designed as a foundation for a child labor strategy development process for the coffee value chain in Ethiopia. It employed an exploratory qualitative design.

General approach: A participatory, Human Rights Framework

This study adopted a participatory human rights framework to explore the causes and consequences of child labor in the coffee sector, involving diverse participants [22–25]. This framework emphasizes the need to tackle socioeconomic disparities and discriminatory practices that impede progress, particularly by prioritizing children's rights to education, health, and development. It postulates the principles of universality, indivisibility, equality, inclusion, participation, and accountability to guide economic activities, strengthen duty-bearers' capacities to meet obligations and rights-holders' rights.

At the heart of this approach is the urgent need for rigorous enforcement of laws against child labor. Establishing a minimum age of employment and implementing regulations to shield children from hazardous work are essential for fostering their overall development. Access to quality education is crucial, creating a compelling alternative to child labor and enhancing children's skills. Moreover, social protection programs play a vital role in reducing families' reliance on child labor.

The human rights approach underlies tackling the root causes of child labor, including poverty and educational inequities, as key to developing sustainable solutions. It highlights the significance of collaboration across various sectors and levels to share best practices and resources effectively. Additionally, it promotes a child-focused approach that raises public awareness and shifts societal norms around child labor, fostering an environment that protects and develops children while empowering communities to enhance their well-being.

This study integrates a participatory approach with the human rights framework to guide its execution [26, 27]. It reviews existing legal frameworks and engages stakeholders through workshops, interviews, and focus group discussions to gather insights, identify causes and consequences of child labor, and map stakeholders' influence, resources, and potential impact on the problem.

Data collection

This study employed primary and secondary methods to engage stakeholders and collect relevant data on child labor in the coffee value chain in Ethiopia.

Desk review

This study involved a comprehensive desk review of relevant international, regional, and national documents, project documents, research publications, and governmental/non-governmental reports on child labor in the Ethiopian coffee value chain.

Ethiopia has ratified several international and regional conventions to combat child labor, and it has incorporated most of them into its laws. We analyzed these documents using an adapted framework loosely based on the works of Gilbert and Terrell [28] and Chambers and Bonk [29]. We explored their goals/objectives, bases of social provisions, types and delivery strategies of provisions, and

financial/structural implications. The document we reviewed include The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); The ILO Convention No.138 (1973); The ILO Convention No. 182 (1999); The AU Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999); The Ethiopian Labour Proclamation No. 1156 (2019); The Ethiopian Constitution (1994); The Civil Code (1960); The Revised Family Code (2000); The Criminal Code Proc. No. 414 (2004); The National Children's Policy (2017); The National Action Plan to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labor (2021–2025); The National Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons (2015–2020); The National Social Protection Policy (2012)

The desk review examined policy, strategy, and programs relevant to child labor in Ethiopia. Furthermore, to effectively understand the scope and patterns of child labor in Ethiopia's coffee value chain, we will review a wide range of available resources, including both published and unpublished research and program reports, and other relevant literature.

Consultative Workshop

In designing this study, we organized a consultative workshop with key stakeholders and experts in the coffee value chain, including GOs, NGOs, coffee farmers' cooperatives, coffee exporters, etc. The workshop sought insights on the legal and policy environment, study design, potential participants, child labor programs and interventions, etc. Following the consultative workshop, we developed the comprehensive study design, along with data collection tools and a review checklist.

Key Informant Interview (KII)

We conducted 30 key informant interviews (KIIs) with purposely selected individuals, such as coffee farmers' associations, government offices (e.g., Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Trade, and Ministry of Women and Social Affairs), farmers' cooperative leaders, children and parents in coffee producing communities and other relevant stakeholders and experts in the Ethiopian coffee value chain. These interviews will provide deeper insights into the systemic and institutional challenges and opportunities related to child labor.

We developed a comprehensive Key Informant Interview (KII) guide, adaptable to key informants based on their sector and organization, consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives, insights, supporting examples, anecdotes, and data. The KIIs engaged key decision-makers, leaders, experts, administrators, and exporters to discuss the problem and the broader implications of child labor in the coffee value chain. The KII guide covered a range of topical issues, including the magnitude of the problem, the effectiveness of public responses, the role of law enforcement, and the critical need for a coordinated strategy to address child labor. The KIIs will also explore the socioeconomic factors that perpetuate child labor, such as poverty, lack of access to education, and cultural norms that normalize child work. Participants will be encouraged to share their perspectives on how policy interventions, community engagement, and targeted support programs can address these underlying issues. Additionally, the KIIs explored the status and effectiveness of multisectoral and multilayered collaborations involving GOs, NGOs, CBOs, and the private sector to ensure a sustainable

and holistic approach to eradicating child labor from the coffee value chain, specifically in the Illu-Ababor Zone, Alle, and Becho Woredas.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

We will conduct a total of 4FGDs, 2 in Alle and 2 in Becho Woredas, and within each Woreda, one with male and another with female coffee farmers. The FGDs specifically aimed to gather detailed inputs from coffee producers and their stakeholders on the nature and extent of child labor in the coffee-producing communities, including priority areas for intervention, existing challenges, and potential responses. The FGDs delved into the socioeconomic factors associated with child labor and explored community perceptions and attitudes regarding this issue.

To facilitate fruitful discussions, we used an FGD guide listing 8–10 thematic questions derived from literature and policy reviews. Discussants addressed these questions and thematic topics, and also engaged in creative and participatory activities. These activities will include mapping the child labor problem, identifying community assets to combat it, and developing strategies and activities to mitigate the impact of child labor. This approach emphasizes a strengths-based perspective, empowering communities to actively engage in addressing child labor within coffee production.

Sampling design and technique

We employed a purposive sampling design to recruit participants with awareness and expertise relevant to understanding child labor in the coffee-producing communities. Consequently, we involved GOs at various administrative levels – including the Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority (ECTA) and ministries related to women's, social, and labor affairs – to gather insights on policies and monitoring efforts on child labor in the sector. We also engaged partners from associations such as the Ethiopian Coffee Exporters' Association (ECEA) and Women in Coffee (WiC), and NGOs like Farm Africa and Ethio Child-Focused Activities (ECFA), which run child welfare and labor mitigation programs. These organizations provided valuable information regarding the scale and causes of child labor and their experiences in implementing child-focused initiatives. The list of organizations includes ECTA, MoJ, MoA, M(B)WCSA, MoLS, ECEA, ECGPEA, OCPA, WiC, ECX, Farm Africa, ECFA, ILO, GIZ, and CARE Ethiopia.

Data analysis

We conducted a systematic and comprehensive desk review of existing legal and policy documents relevant to child labor across multiple dimensions: goals and objectives; provisions; strategies; and financial and structural implications. The insights derived from this review were integrated with international experiences and best practices in child labor mitigation strategies. This dual approach ensures that the findings are both contextually relevant and informed by global perspectives.

On the other hand, qualitative data collected through KIIs and FGDs, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English, would be uploaded to Atlas.ti (v.9) for coding. A deductive,

structured coding procedure was employed to organize and analyze qualitative data. The pertinent codes relevant to the design of a comprehensive child labor strategy include: causes and consequences of child labor; mitigation strategies and intervention programs and services; and stakeholders and their roles in mitigating child labor.

The coding process was not entirely deductive. It iteratively developed and grouped codes by affinity, developing a nuanced understanding of community realities, priorities, and challenges related to child labor, including mitigating circumstances and potential prospects for improvement.

Data desk review, KIIs, FGDs, and consultative workshops were appropriately analyzed and crafted into a report that the researchers presented in a validation workshop involving relevant stakeholders and experts in the Ethiopian coffee value chain. The *validation workshop* brought together a diverse group of participants, including cooperative members, stakeholders, representatives from relevant government offices, exporters, and other key actors. We gathered their feedback through a combination of general comments and smaller, focused group discussions that delved deeper into specific segments of the report. This participatory approach ensured that diverse perspectives enriched the report, enhancing its relevance, validity, and accuracy.

We used different methods (desk review, KIIs, and workshops) and data sources (primary and secondary) to enhance and triangulate data on child labor in coffee-producing communities. This comprehensive approach ensured the reliability and depth of our understanding. The desk review synthesized existing literature and reports on child labor in coffee-producing regions, providing a broad contextual framework. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) gathered qualitative insights from stakeholders and experts, offering nuanced perspectives on the local realities of child labor. Workshops served as participatory platforms to validate findings. The integration of primary data collected directly from the field with secondary data from reputable sources strengthened the evidence base and ensured a holistic and well-rounded strategy.

Ethics

This study received ethical clearance from the Research and Ethics Review Committee of Jimma University (R/GS20321/2025).

Results

Prevalence of child labor

Participants described child labor in Ethiopia's coffee sector as persistent, complex, and deeply embedded in communities' lives. A cooperative chairperson in Alle Woreda recalled growing up "seeing children working with their families, especially in coffee production. There is a high volume of child labor in the community" (K1-M-CO). An advisor to Care Ethiopia emphasized its broader scope: "Child labor is

a persistent challenge in Ethiopia – most prevalent in rural areas and in agricultural work,” adding that in coffee-producing areas it feels “ever-pressing” (K2-M-NG).

Geography plays a critical role. “Southwestern Ethiopia shows a higher magnitude of child labor within the coffee sector” (K8-F-GO), while others noted similar prevalence in central and southern regions (W-P4-M-NG). During peak harvests, children aged 14–17 are “usually involved in coffee sorting and harvesting” (K3-M-NG), often at the expense of schooling: “Families often have more kids to increase labor and income. During harvest, children frequently miss school, and I’ve noticed that child labor in this sector is increasing” (K4-M-GO). Reliance on family labor reflects entrenched cultural norms, with smallholders forming “the sector’s backbone” (K5-M-GO). As one cooperative leader observed, “There’s a strong tradition of involving children in farming and coffee production... especially around ages 14 and 15. Despite improvements, the culture of child labor persists” (K6-M-CO).

Structural gaps compound the issue. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission has found that “child labor is widespread in coffee-producing areas” (K7-M-GO), with children contributing both year-round on family farms and seasonally in cooperatives. Yet the true scale remains obscured: “There is no national survey on child labor... Many child workers remain hidden in the informal sector, and fear of retaliation, social stigma, and lack of protection discourage reporting” (K14-F-GO).

Exploitation occurs in both informal and formal systems. In Alle, “Child labor is common in our community. We employ children for day work. Some families force their own children into labor” (P1-F1-M-Alle). Farmers may also misreport ages to meet quotas: “When asked about the children’s age, they would lie to get the economic benefits” (P-W1-GO). Children are sometimes hired as daily laborers to supplement family income, with “payments, duration, and locations of work vary[ing] with the employer” (K4-M-GO).

Finally, labor dynamics differ across production systems. In plantation setups, “children may work alongside hired laborers due to higher labor demand,” while in forest coffee systems, child involvement is largely confined to domestic tasks (K3-M-NG). Overall, participants highlight a tension between hidden household labor and more visible exploitation during peak seasons, driven by income pressures and weak protections.

Types of child labor

Children’s involvement in Ethiopia’s coffee value chain spans the entire production cycle, from farming to processing. As one participant explained, they perform “a range of labor-intensive tasks tied to coffee production: planting, weeding, collection, and other arduous activities” (K2-M-NG). Others noted that children are engaged in “digging holes, clearing fields, and harvesting coffee beans” (K9-M-CO), while their participation extends to “clearing and preparing fields, collecting and sorting beans, and more” (K10-M-NG). Coffee processors often prefer children because “compared to adults, children are faster, more flexible, and more amenable to tasks such as collecting beans from trees,” though this work carries “a risk of falls and physical harm” (K10-M-NG). Post-harvest, children are valued for their “dexterity and

agility to squeeze through narrow spaces, collect stray beans, or climb trees to collect ripe coffee beans” (P-W1-GO).

An ECTA staff member provided a fuller picture: “Children are involved from the early stages of farming—seedling preparation, transportation, planting, weeding, harvesting, and beyond” (K4-M-GO). Their responsibilities continue into processing—“peeling, sorting, cleaning, and drying”—and even “night guarding to prevent vandalism.” This work is “long and demanding,” often requiring travel far from home “without adequate rest or nutrition” (K4-M-GO). Harvesting, in particular, stands out as a core activity, with children “often preferred for certain tasks, especially bean collection, because they are nimble and light” (K11-M-CO).

Yet participants highlighted a persistent ambiguity between child work and child labor. An NGO advisor noted that confusion “does not help the prevalence of child labor,” as rural communities “struggle to grasp the distinction” (K2-M-NG). A government official echoed this, observing that children’s roles —“accompanying parents, carrying tools, and even domestic tasks”—blur the line between acceptable assistance and harmful exploitation (K8-F-GO).

Interventions and changes

Participants offered divided views on the status of child labor in Ethiopia’s coffee value chain. Several described improvements linked to awareness and training initiatives. A farmer from Bacho Woreda noted, “There has been a change, especially since NGOs like GIZ have provided training, which has given us a better understanding” (K1-M-CO). Another added, “Farmers are increasingly conscious that production standards—especially in terms of labor conditions—must be free from child labor before the coffee is exported to the global market” (K11-M-CO). Others echoed this, reporting that “Public awareness has improved in recent years, esp. since GIZ started providing training” (K9-M-CO). GIZ’s role was highlighted for “facilitating coordination among GOs, NGOs, and community members... Initiatives like billboards around schools have positively influenced attitudes” (K10-M-NG).

NGOs and cooperatives also pursued indirect strategies by strengthening institutions and livelihoods. One NGO participant described a “two-pronged approach to empower farmers through cooperative capacity-building in financial and forest management” (K12-F-NG). Training-of-trainers programs aimed to cascade awareness and institutionalize gains (K10-M-NG). Government actors emphasized resilience-building: “SafetyNet programs – funded by the World Bank – strive to build family resilience through capacity-building activities and direct cash transfers” (K13-M-GO). Cooperatives reported certifying child-labor-free producers, building schools, and raising awareness (K6-M-CO), while campaigns by teachers and community leaders sought to improve school attendance (K8-F-GO). As one cooperative leader concluded, “Child labor has reduced in recent years due to government programs and the efforts of cooperatives like ours, but there’s still much work to be done” (K6-M-CO).

Yet others perceived deterioration. One participant observed that child labor had “increased in certain regions, particularly in the southern parts of the country” (K2-M-NG). Institutional ambiguity was cited as

a barrier: “We are not focusing on child labor as a stand-alone issue... we often lack facilities and protocols for managing children during case resolutions” (K14-F-GO). Another added, “I have not seen a formal program by any government or NGO addressing child labor in the coffee value chain, nor have we defined it as a priority agenda” (K5-M-GO).

At the national level, ECTA was described as responding strategically to EU demands for child-labor-free coffee, organizing annual campaigns and appointing a Women and Children’s Rights Officer (P1-M-GO; P2-M-GO). Its approach was framed as holistic: “ECTA promotes the rights of children within a holistic framework... rather than targeting child labor as a standalone program” (K4-M-GO). It drafts laws and strategies across coffee, tea, and spice sectors, aiming to “promote productivity and quality... to help families generate revenue that supports their well-being and development” (K5-M-GO). Meanwhile, MoLSA’s national action plan suffered coordination gaps after institutional restructuring, with child labor often sidelined under MoWSA’s broader focus on women’s issues (K2-M-NG; K10-M-NG). As one participant summarized, “Various policies exist on child rights, even if not explicitly focused on child labor” (K2-M-NG).

Overall, while awareness campaigns, certification schemes, and livelihood programs have contributed to progress in some areas, gaps in responsibility, program specificity, and regional variation continue to shape whether child labor is perceived as declining – or, in certain regions, worsening.

Causes of child labor

Economic pressures and poverty

Poverty emerged as the most consistent driver of child labor. Families living close to survival often depend on children’s work for immediate income. As one participant explained, “limited money and the need for day labor led parents to pressure children into employment” (K1-M-CO). Another added, “population pressure deepens poverty and makes children work to secure immediate income” (K2-M-NG). Schooling is frequently deprioritized, as households “cannot afford the costs and forego daily needs for education” (K2-M-NG). During harvests, poverty creates practical constraints: “Families may not have the funds to hire external workers, so children’s labor becomes a practical necessity” (K11-M-CO). Smallholders with “small plots, seasonal income, and vulnerability during off-seasons” (K10-M-NG) often rely on “every available hand” (K5-M-GO; K4-M-GO). A government official summarized: “Child labor is cheap,” making it financially attractive under strain (K7-M-GO).

Cultural norms and traditions

Cultural expectations reinforce children’s participation. In Jimma, “families view large households as productive because children can help with work” (K10-M-NG). A resident of Bacho Woreda noted a “long-standing cultural practice of children helping families,” seen as appropriate since “a child learns a trade” (K11-M-CO). Yet this perception “can blur the boundary between acceptable assistance and exploitative labor” (K11-M-CO). Communities often expect children to contribute through herding or firewood collection (K5-M-GO), with “ten years of age... mark[ing] the threshold where a child becomes expected to

support the family” (K10-M-NG). FGD participants echoed this, describing child labor as socially understood as “right and should be encouraged” (P4-F1-M-Alle), though some questioned how everyday family tasks should be defined (K3-M-NG).

Limited awareness and knowledge gaps

Weak awareness of children’s rights and legal protections sustains child labor. Participants noted, “limited knowledge of children’s rights and the difference between ‘child work’ and exploitative ‘child labor’” (K4-M-GO). Communities often lack clarity about what qualifies as child labor (K2-M-NG), and “many people are not fully informed about the laws that protect children’s rights” (K12-F-NG). A resident explained that under economic pressure, “children enter work that should belong to adults or schools, while public awareness of the harms and rights is generally low” (K11-M-CO). Workshop participants highlighted confusion between “child work, child labor, and the worst form of child labor” (P2-M-W-GO), noting that weak knowledge of the Criminal Code and Labor Proclamation undermines enforcement (P4-F-W-GO; P1-F3-M-Bacho).

Policy gaps and weak implementation

Ambiguities in legal frameworks exacerbate exploitation. The Labor Proclamation allows children above 15 to work in activities that do not jeopardize development but “does not specify the types of activities... inviting misinterpretations” (P4-F-W-GO). This leads to inconsistent practices, with some treating domestic chores as acceptable, while others justify hazardous work like “ploughing, mining, etc.” (P3-F-W-CO). Participants stressed the need for explicit clarification (P4-M-W-CO). Structural weaknesses compound the issue: policy implementation is “uncoordinated and ununified” (P3-F-W-GO), with “no well-staffed, budgeted, and resourced supervisory institution” (P4-M-W-CO). Reporting mechanisms are lacking, and accountability remains weak (P2-F-W-GO). Despite these challenges, some expressed cautious optimism: “Stronger enforcement of these laws would likely reduce child labor, and the laws themselves offer opportunities for progress” (K15-F-NG). A government participant agreed: “Though I believe they are adequate, their effective implementation, coordination, and resource allocation are crucial” (K14-F-GO).

Educational barriers and limited opportunities

Restricted access to education further drives child labor. An FGD participant in Alle Woreda noted: “a lack of educational opportunities for children, with remoteness of schools and difficult roads making it easier for children to be drawn into labor” (P3-F4-F-Alle). Low completion rates reduce awareness of child rights: “It is rare to find someone who has completed high school, which affects the community’s awareness about child rights and the long-term consequences of child labor” (K10-M-NG). Geographic barriers discourage attendance, as “children travel several kilometers to reach school, and parents may prioritize labor contributions at home over schooling” (K18-M-GO). An ECTA expert reinforced that limited education “further exposes children to labor abuse” (K4-M-GO).

Consequences of child labor

Educational disruptions and developmental setbacks

Child labor consistently undermines children's education and long-term growth. A government participant explained that it "often interferes with their development and schooling, carrying long-term negative consequences for their growth and future opportunities" (K18-M-GO). An NGO advisor added, "their education suffers. Even when schooling is attempted, they are not well-fed and are malnourished, impairing their ability to learn and to perform well in school" (K2-M-NG). Others noted that child labor "causes withdrawal from school or poor performance, with children earning money at a young age and tending to undervalue schooling and its long-term benefits" (K10-M-NG). Early access to money "creates a form of informal independence... negatively impacting personal development, affecting school attendance and development" (K10-M-NG).

Participants described widespread consequences: "Child labor pulls children out of school, limits their long-term prospects, and causes emotional and psychosocial harms" (K8-F-GO). Children "miss school, struggle to study, and experience declines in academic performance" (K7-M-GO). The repercussions include "delayed entry into school, reduced concentration, and restriction on the freedom to play and grow" (K5-M-GO). A government official warned, "society suffers when the children suffer, compromising long-term development and well-being" (K4-M-GO). Another added, "It hinders a generation's development... jeopardizing the country's future by leaving adults underprepared for their roles" (K13-M-GO).

Local accounts illustrate these risks vividly. In Alle Woreda, "many children who leave school often begin chewing khat, and over time, some drift into crime, such as theft or robbery, which harms the community as a whole" (K9-M-CO). A Bacho Woreda participant cautioned that child labor "harbors a risk to a country's social and political health: a generation deprived of education and safe development cannot lead effectively in the future" (K11-M-CO). FGD discussants agreed that "many parents ignore proper child care, leading to children being engaged in work that undermines their attitude toward education" (P6-F1-M).

Physical and mental health impacts

Child labor also imposes severe health consequences. Participants described injuries from "using sharp tools like sickles" (K1-M-CO), "falling from trees, snake bites, and carrying loads beyond their capacity" (K4-M-GO), and "physically demanding tasks" (K10-M-NG). Malnutrition compounds these risks: children suffer stunting and wasting "due to inadequate nutrition and strenuous work" (K2-M-NG; K8-F-GO), often "working in rain or long hours without adequate food" (K6-M-CO). These harms can persist into adulthood, with some "retiring early due to long-term impacts on health and well-being" (K13-M-GO).

The consequences extend beyond physical strain. "Physical harm and injury from labor in the fields make them burdens to their families and the wider community" (K11-M-CO). Abuse is also common: "physical abuse and neglect are frequent injuries among working children" (MoJ, K14-F-GO). As daily laborers, "children face significant hazards and abuses" (K4-M-GO). Emotional and psychosocial harms

are equally severe, with young girls particularly vulnerable: “For young girls, risks extend to greater vulnerability to sexual harassment and abuse” (K8-F-GO). In forest-based coffee areas, “girls in particular may be exposed to sexual and other abuses” (K10-M-NG).

Recommendations

Strengthening collaboration and institutional coordination

Across government, NGOs, cooperatives, and communities, participants emphasized the need for unified action. An NGO participant captured the frustration: “Improved coordination is essential between sectors” (K2-M-NG). He noted that when MoLS identifies exploited children, MoWSA must handle rehabilitation, yet “there is no consistent response linking the two” (K2-M-NG). A workshop participant echoed: “Child protection involves multiple governmental agencies, leading to gaps in implementation” (P9-F-W-GO).

Community members reinforced this call: “A collective approach is essential to combat child labor” (F-F-Bacho). Another mapped shared responsibility: “The government enforces laws more strictly, cooperatives raise awareness, schools need better accessibility, and children’s committees should monitor labor issues” (F3-F-Bacho). Another participant claims, “Change must be holistic; we can’t address one aspect without the others. We need to shift attitudes toward education, early marriage, and children’s involvement in coffee work simultaneously” (K6-M-CO). Participants pressed for structural reform, including “a community-based system to monitor, report, and ensure compliance” (K7-M-GO), “a national entity to align actions across ministries to avoid silos,” and “multisectoral collaboration with community ownership” (K13-M-GO). An ECTA participant outlined a holistic approach: “Strong legal enforcement, targeted family support, practical measures during peak harvest, and sustained investments in education” (K4-M-GO).

Expanding education and other amenities

Participants stressed that attractive alternatives to labor must be created through education and training services. One official urged: “The government should promote education and training opportunities for children” (K18-M-GO). An ECTA expert added: “Build schools near communities... implement school-feeding programs, provide uniforms and materials, and ensure sustained support” (K4-M-GO). Others highlighted community development: “Building schools, health centers, roads, and reliable water supplies can help families see that sending children to school is the better choice” (K6-M-CO).

Workshop participants also urged policies to mobilize adults: “The government should help adults join the workforce... some exploit children for labor. Policies are needed to encourage productive engagement” (P13-F-W-GO). Aligning health services with labor law was seen as practical: “Age verification intersects health services with labor safeguards, creating barriers against underage work” (K17-M-GO).

Ensuring policy coherence and enforcement

Participants agreed that while Ethiopia has strong legal frameworks, enforcement remains weak. “A comprehensive study is needed to assess the problem’s magnitude, evaluate policy performance, identify gaps, and better protect children” (P4-M-W-CO). An ECTA expert stressed: “The government should lead the fight... raising awareness, improving enforcement, and strengthening collaboration” (K4-M-GO). NGO voices emphasized institutional power: “Effective supervision and enforcement are vital. Authorities must have the resources and authority to enforce the law fully” (K3-M-NG). Others called for integration: “Many organizations work on agronomy, quality, and marketing, while only a few focus on child labor. It would help to integrate a child labor component” (K10-M-NG).

Empowering communities and local institutions

Participants highlighted grassroots ownership. An NGO participant urged “enhancing the local presence of MoWSA and engaging chiefs and religious figures” (K10-M-NG). ECTA participants emphasized using “local institutions like Iddir and Iqub, traditional authorities like Abba Gadda, and the media” (K4-M-GO). Religious institutions were seen as powerful allies, with FGDs in Alle and Bacho noting churches’ role in discouraging child labor. Community members stressed economic empowerment: “Forming and strengthening farmer associations can help create market linkages and resilience” (K11-M-CO). Yet accountability was also emphasized: “The prevalence of child labor underscores the need for robust supervision and strict enforcement” (K12-F-NG).

Raising awareness and changing norms

Awareness gaps remain profound. “Parents do not hate their children; rather, they have inherited beliefs that children should help on the farm” (K5-M-GO). Cooperative leaders stressed: “Raising awareness and providing training on child labor and its health consequences are crucial” (K6-M-CO). Participants cautioned that efforts must be recurrent: “Programs should be comprehensive and persistent, recognizing that child labor is tied to cultural norms” (P6-M-W-GO). Government officials urged clarity: “Campaigns must clearly define what constitutes child labor and which activities are off-limits by law” (K8-F-GO). A cooperative leader summarized: “The path forward lies in a combination of awareness, community involvement, and systemic support” (K11-M-CO).

Building household livelihood resilience

Poverty was repeatedly identified as the root cause. “Children get paid a lot – 500 birr per day – collecting coffee beans, which attracts them. It is a lot of money for poor families” (P16-M-W-GO). An NGO participant affirmed: “Poverty remains the primary driver of child labor” (K10-M-NG). Solutions focused on strengthening households: “Enhance livelihoods and address the root economic drivers” (K13-M-GO). Strategies included “access to loans to diversify income” (P16-M-W-GO), “cash transfers and financial assistance” (K7-M-GO), and “labor-saving technologies and mechanization to reduce child labor during harvest” (K4-M-GO). Another ECTA staff member emphasized women’s empowerment: “Improving women’s economic well-being is a positive force toward reducing dependence on men” (K5-M-GO).

Rehabilitation and reintegration services

Removing children from hazardous work must be followed by rehabilitation. Yet current systems are weak: “Case management for child labor victims is insufficient, and rehabilitation services lack clear guidelines” (P14-F-W-GO). Participants called for comprehensive support: “Children need rehabilitation and reintegration through educational, health, psychosocial, and legal services... consistent government funding is vital” (K8-F-GO). Employing social workers was proposed to provide “awareness, psychosocial support, resource connections, rehabilitation assistance, and family reintegration” (K7-M-GO).

Engaging the private sector

Finally, participants urged binding commitments from investors. “Investors in the coffee sector primarily seek profit... laws should make social commitments binding” (P4-M-W-CO). Employers were called upon to “implement laws, give back to the community, and support poor families” (K4-M-GO). Cooperatives argued for frameworks requiring exporters to reinvest profits locally: “Exporters should reinvest a portion of their profits into the communities where they operate” (K6-M-CO).

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the reliance on an exploratory qualitative design, drawing primarily on key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and workshops, limits the generalizability of findings. While these methods provide rich contextual insights, they do not allow for precise measurement of prevalence or statistical inference. Second, the purposive sampling strategy, though appropriate for capturing expert perspectives and community realities, introduces potential bias and reduces representativeness across Ethiopia’s diverse coffee-growing regions. Fourth, the absence of a comprehensive national survey on child labor in Ethiopia constrains triangulation and leaves the true scale of the problem obscured. Finally, persistent ambiguity between child work and child labor complicates interpretation, as communities often blur the distinction between acceptable family assistance and exploitative practices. These methodological and contextual constraints underscore the need for nationally representative, mixed-methods research that can complement qualitative insights with quantitative evidence, thereby strengthening the reliability and applicability of future child labor strategies in Ethiopia’s coffee value chain.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that child labor in Ethiopia’s coffee value chain is both widespread and deeply rooted, shaped by the combined forces of poverty, cultural traditions, weak enforcement, and structural gaps. Ethiopia reflects broader global patterns that place Sub-Saharan Africa at the highest prevalence of child labor, yet coffee production emerges as a particularly critical site of exploitation. Children are engaged in every stage of the process, from planting to processing, often sacrificing their education and health, with the problem most pronounced in the coffee-growing regions of the South and Southwest.

At the same time, the findings differ from conventional narratives. While international literature often frames child labor primarily as a consequence of poverty and household vulnerability, this study underscores the equally powerful influence of cultural norms that normalize children's participation in farming. These traditions blur the line between acceptable child work and exploitative labor. Moreover, Ethiopia's ratification of international conventions has not translated into effective enforcement. Informal labor arrangements, misreporting of ages, and hidden household practices reveal the persistent gap between policy commitments and lived realities.

Interventions such as awareness campaigns, cooperative certification, NGO-led training, and social protection programs mirror strategies recommended globally, but Ethiopian efforts remain fragmented and uneven. Regional disparities are stark: some communities report progress through cooperative initiatives and NGO training, while others experience deterioration due to institutional ambiguity and lack of prioritization. This divergence highlights the need for context-specific approaches that move beyond generic prescriptions.

Breaking the cycle of child labor requires an integrated, multi-sectoral response. Stronger enforcement of child work laws must be accompanied by sustained investment in education, livelihood diversification, and social protection. Certification schemes and community-driven awareness can yield tangible improvements, but only when embedded within a coherent national strategy. Robust research is also essential to capture the true scale of child labor, evaluate interventions, and understand the cultural norms that sustain it. Community ownership remains central, with trusted voices, including religious institutions, leading awareness efforts, alongside investments in schools, infrastructure, fair pricing, and rehabilitation for affected children.

Ultimately, tackling child labor in Ethiopia's coffee sector is both a moral imperative and a developmental necessity. Without coordinated national action, Ethiopia risks continued noncompliance with global ethical sourcing standards, undermining children's rights and the sustainability of its coffee economy. Only through legal clarity, solid evidence, and grassroots leadership can Ethiopia break the cycle of child labor in its coffee value chain.

Declarations

Ethical approval and accordance

The Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority granted approval for the study, and ethical clearance was subsequently obtained from the Research and Ethics Review Committee of Jimma University (R/GS20321/2025). To enhance transparency and reporting quality, the study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ). In addition, all procedures adhered strictly to established ethical principles, institutional research policies, and community engagement standards throughout the research process [30]. Participants received clear and accessible information about the project's purpose, methods, and potential impacts, enabling voluntary and informed consent. All data were treated with strict confidentiality, stored securely, and protected through encryption and restricted

access to authorized personnel. Sensitive information was safeguarded to ensure participant anonymity. Reports and recommendations were prepared with accuracy and transparency, with conflicts of interest avoided and potential biases disclosed. The dignity and autonomy of all stakeholders, particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups, were prioritized. Engagements were conducted with cultural sensitivity, respect for social and religious contexts, and attention to minimizing power imbalances. Trauma-informed approaches were applied when addressing sensitive topics, and support mechanisms such as counseling referrals were made available where needed.

Consent to participate

Consent forms were tailored to the literacy levels and cultural contexts of participants, ensuring comprehension and genuine consent. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.

Consent to publish

The authors affirm that all participants provided informed consent for the data and findings to be published.

Competing interests

Authors declared no conflict of interest

Clinical trial number

Not applicable.

Funding Declaration

CARE Ethiopia supported fieldwork for this research.

Author Contribution

MA designed and implemented the study; drafted and reviewed the manuscript KKS supported stakeholder engagement; reviewed the manuscript.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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