

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Case Study Series

**Factors Influencing Decisions to Use
Child Labour:
A Case Study of Poor Households in Herat**



Amanda Sim and Marie-Louise Høilund-Carlsen

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About the Authors

Amanda Sim is the research officer for child labour at AREU. Prior to joining AREU, she conducted research on child protection in northern Uganda and worked as a nonprofit management consultant with the Robin Hood Foundation, a private grant-making organisation serving low-income individuals and families in New York City. Amanda holds a Masters degree in international relations from The Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Marie-Louise Høilund-Carlsen is an anthropologist who has spent the past 18 months conducting research in rural Afghanistan. Prior to her work on child labour, she has done research on female participation in local development in western Afghanistan and on alternative reconciliation processes in the Balkans. Marie-Louise is currently coordinating a study on change in rural livelihoods in northern Afghanistan.

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Amanda Sim and Marie-Louise Høilund-Carlson
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Acronyms

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
CDC	Community Development Committee
DRAT	Demand Reduction Action Team
IDP	internally displaced person
ILO	International Labour Organization
MoLSAMD	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and the Disabled
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Glossary

<i>Afghani (or Afs)</i>	official Afghan currency; approximately 49 Afghanis=US\$1
<i>Arbab</i>	village leader; representative between community and central government
<i>gomrok</i>	customs area at the border
<i>kuchi</i>	nomadic group
<i>mokhi</i>	marriage arrangement between two families involving the mutual exchange of daughters without the need for bride price
<i>nesfagee</i>	profit sharing agreement where the person who contracts a carpet pays for the materials and the sale price of the carpet is divided equally between the contractor and the carpet weaver
<i>shura</i>	customary decision-making body
<i>toman</i>	superunit of the official currency of Iran (rial); 1 toman=10 rials=US\$0.001
<i>tel kashidan</i>	fuel extraction or stealing; illicit work activity commonly performed at the border; also known as <i>tel zadan</i>
<i>tel zadan</i>	fuel extraction or stealing; illicit work activity commonly performed at the border; also known as <i>tel kashidan</i>
<i>wakil</i>	neighbourhood representative
<i>wasita</i>	connections to powerful people

Executive Summary

This case study concludes a three-part series examining household decision-making on the use of child labour in urban and rural Afghanistan. The research for the case study was conducted in two sites in Herat province: an urban neighbourhood of Herat city and a village near the Islam Qala border between Afghanistan and Iran. Findings from the two sites provided insight into the diverse nature of child labour even within a single province of Afghanistan. In particular, the findings illustrated the extent to which household decisions around the use of child labour are influenced by the prevailing social, cultural, educational and livelihood contexts.

This paper acknowledges that poverty forms the context in which households make decisions regarding child labour, while seeking to identify and explore other factors that may influence or interact with economic motivations. By including poor households that have chosen not to use child labour, the study aims to better understand how and why different households perceive risk and respond to it. Finally, this paper describes the types of work children commonly perform and the working conditions they experience. It also assesses the potential positive and negative effects of work on children's access to education and their physical and psychosocial well-being.

Key findings

- All case study households face **chronic livelihood and economic insecurity** fuelled by high unemployment, low earnings, high cost of living and debt. The households in Islam Qala have particularly limited livelihood options beyond work activities at the border. Poverty is an important contextual factor in the decision to use child labour or not. However, findings from both child labour and non-child labour households suggest that poverty is not necessarily the only or most compelling factor in the household decision-making process.
- Households often rely on child labour as an alternative source of income when a **male income earner is absent** or **gender norms prevent adult women from working**. In particular, the lack of opportunities for women's work in the Islam Qala site means that the burden of contributing to household income often falls on male children. In some cases, however, the willingness and ability of women to contravene gender norms by working outside the home has allowed children to remain in school and refrain from work.
- **Gender and birth order** influence decisions around which children work and the kinds of activities they perform. Gender norms often dictate that boys work outside the home for pay while girls engage in household chores and home-based economic activity. Generally, the eldest boy works, often enabling younger siblings to continue their education.
- Households engage in complex **cost-benefit analyses** when assessing tradeoffs between work and school. Factors that influence household decisions on whether or not to invest in their children's education include: the quality of schooling (particularly in the Islam Qala site); the likelihood of future employment opportunities; and issues that may reduce the likelihood of future returns, including ethnic discrimination and gender. Work and school are treated as competing priorities particularly if employers and school staff are not aware of or are unwilling to accommodate the special needs of working children.

- **Learning vocational and life skills** is an important, non-economic motivation for some households to send their children to work. Parents often see vocational skills as safety nets, particularly in the current context of high unemployment. Some parents also view work as an important part of the transition from childhood to adulthood as children begin to learn a sense of responsibility. Given community fears of criminality and insecurity, engaging children in work is also a way to keep them busy and safe from negative or dangerous influences. In the Islam Qala site, however, parents send their children to work even though they recognise that the work provides few opportunities for learning and instead exposes children to abuse and criminal behaviour.
- **Community norms** around work and school exert significant influence on household decision-making around child labour. **Positive role models** (i.e. educated individuals who are professionally successful) in the community can encourage others to follow their example by investing in children's education. Conversely, **lack of community cohesion and a culture of resignation and powerlessness** (as seen in the Islam Qala site) feed into a sense that children must work – even if it is potentially harmful to their physical and psychosocial well-being.
- Poor households that have chosen not to send their children to work exhibit certain characteristics that distinguish them from the child labour households. Such households show greater commitment to and involvement in their children's education and demonstrate more awareness of positive role models and the roles and rights of children. Through personal creativity, long-term planning and access to help networks, these households tend to be more successful in keeping children in school. Finally, they make decisions based on different perceptions of short- and long-term risks and benefits of children's work. None of these are immutable child labour or non-child labour traits *per se*; rather, they are responses that can change depending on the context and the resources of the household at any given time. Households must therefore be provided with the **appropriate support in order to cope with insecurity and risk without resorting to child labour**.
- All the focal children in the child labour cases are under the minimum age for employment in Afghanistan and work many more hours than permitted under Afghan law. They also face both physical and psychosocial hazards that can have severe and long-term consequences for their well-being. The degree to which children are exposed to harm depends on the **interplay of hazards, risks and protective factors** in their work and family lives. In the case of the Islam Qala site, hazardous and high-risk activities combined with few protective measures constitute work that is likely to harm not only children's health, but also their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
- Parents and children of both child labour and non-child labour households have high aspirations for a successful and prosperous future. Such aspirations, however, are tempered by physical and economic insecurity and lack of access to high quality education. Tackling the issue of child labour is not only a question of eliminating hazardous or harmful work performed by children, but also requires reviving people's hope and confidence in the future by **increasing physical and livelihood security, improving school quality, and enhancing local governance and accountability**.

1. Introduction

This case study concludes a three-part series examining household decision-making around the use of child labour.¹ The case study series forms the basis for a larger study on child labour, which explores across poor households the various factors that have influenced their decisions to use or not use child labour. Acknowledging that poverty forms the context in which households make decisions regarding child labour, this study aims to identify and explore other factors that may influence or interact with economic motivations. Key among the factors examined in this study are the ways in which households' evaluation of education and work trade-offs – and their direct and opportunity costs – influence decisions about child labour. The study also describes the types and conditions of work commonly performed by children, and attempts to assess the potential positive and negative effects of work on children's access to education and their physical and psychosocial well-being.² Finally, the study presents the aspirations of families for their children, as well as the aspirations of children themselves, and the constraints that many households face in making decisions about their current and future welfare.

This study does not seek to estimate the incidence of child labour, but rather to better understand the complex interaction of factors that inform household decisions to put children to work. Through in-depth, qualitative analysis of a small number of households' decision-making processes, the study aims to inform ongoing efforts by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD), the social protection consultative group within the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) process, and national and international child-focused organizations to mitigate risks to working children and ultimately reduce dependence on child labour. While this case study does not make specific policy or programme recommendations, a subsequent synthesis paper and policy-oriented briefing paper drawing from the findings across the three case studies will do so.

The research for this case study was conducted in two sites in Herat province: an urban neighbourhood of Herat city, and a village near the Islam Qala border between Afghanistan and Iran. These two sites provided insight into the diverse nature of child labour even within a single province of Afghanistan. They demonstrate the extent to which household decisions around the use of child labour are influenced by the prevailing social, cultural, educational and livelihood contexts. The striking differences between the two research sites (located a mere 110 kilometres apart) illustrate that child labour is not a homogenous issue and thus efforts to address it must involve a multifaceted and flexible strategy of short, medium and long-term interventions.

For the purposes of this case study, the term "child labour" refers to children's work activities – whether paid or unpaid, undertaken inside or outside the home, and combined with schooling or not – which are potentially harmful to children's well-being and development.³ This definition draws on Article 32 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to protection from "performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development." In this definition, the emphasis is not on the

¹ The Kabul and Badakhshan case studies are available at www.areu.org.af.

² The term "psychosocial" refers to the interrelation between psychological and social factors, namely the mutual influence of social relationships on thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and vice versa.

³ For a discussion of key trends in the debate around definitions of child labour, please see William E. Myers, "Considering Child Labour: Changing Terms, Issues and Actors at the International Level," *Childhood* 6, no.1 (1999): 13-26.

type of work *per se*, but rather the risk of harm to the child.⁴ The Afghanistan Labour Code adopts a minimum age approach akin to the 1973 International Labour Organization (ILO) Minimum Age Convention, mandating the minimum working age as 15 for non-hazardous work and 18 for hazardous work.

Recognizing that age, gender and type of work are some of the major factors increasing or mitigating risk, all the cases of child labour in this study involve children under the minimum working age of 15 and include work performed by both girls and boys in a variety of sectors. This study does not aim to identify sectors that are particularly hazardous for children, but rather to understand how risk and protective factors interact to either increase or reduce exposure to harm. It is important to note that this study does not look at “the worst forms of child labour” such as the use of children in armed conflict, prostitution or drug trafficking.⁵ Instead, it seeks to understand more common forms of child labour in Afghanistan and how households weigh different costs and benefits when deciding who should work and in what activities.

The paper is divided into two parts following the introduction and methodology sections: the first relates to the research site in Herat city, referred to here as Koche Nasaji, and the second relates to the research site in the Islam Qala border area, referred to here as Dashte Khushk.⁶ Both parts follow the same structure: each begins with an overview of the historical and socio-economic context of the research site, followed by a discussion of key findings related to household decision-making and experiences of child labour. The concluding chapter summarizes emerging themes from both research sites and suggests some broad areas for policy and programme development.

⁴ This is in contrast to the approach taken by the ILO Convention No. 138 *Concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment* (1973), which defines child labour as any work or employment performed by children below a stipulated minimum age.

⁵ ILO Convention No. 182, *Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (1999).

⁶ All research sites and respondents have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

2. Methodology

This section details the methodology used in the two research sites and highlights the challenges faced during fieldwork. Data collection was conducted during three separate field trips from February to April 2008. The research team consisted of two international researchers and four (two female and two male) Afghan field researchers.

2.1 Site selection

Two research sites were selected for the purpose of this study: one, an urban neighbourhood in the heart of Herat city, and the other, a village near the Afghan-Iranian border area commonly known as Islam Qala.

Koche Nasaji site selection

The urban site was identified after a series of discussions with Herat municipality and the various national and international non-governmental organizations (NGO) working in the province, which provided detailed information regarding the geographic and socio-economic layout of the city. Based on this information, the research team selected one neighbourhood which met the following selection criteria:

- Presence of poor households
- Presence of households using child labour, with the children working either within or outside the neighbourhood
- Existence of or access to diverse livelihood activities, in which children are involved
- Access to an educational facility
- Presence of different ethnic groups

The research team then conducted a series of meetings with the local leadership in the community in order to explain the objectives and methodology of the study and obtain informed consent.

Dashte Khushk site selection

The second research site in Islam Qala was selected with the assistance of an international NGO that had been implementing child protection activities in the area since 2007. The NGO introduced the research team to two villages and organised introductory meetings with teachers and *shura* members. The research team used these meetings to obtain basic population and livelihood information, as well as gauge interest in participation. Since both villages met the selection criteria outlined below, the final selection was based primarily on greater willingness of the village leadership to participate in the study:

- Vicinity to border
- Presence of poor households
- Presence of children working at the border
- Access to educational facility

In order to avoid confusion with the activities of the NGO, the research team carefully explained the purpose and independence of the research study, and emphasised that no aid would be given in return for the cooperation of the village.

2.2 Case selection

Seven households (five child labour and two non-child labour) were selected in the research site in Herat city and four households (three child labour and one non-child labour) were selected in the village in Islam Qala. The 11 case households were sampled purposively in order to represent a range of livelihood activities, educational levels, child labour activities, household compositions and ethnicities. Low socio-economic status was an essential selection criterion for all households in order to control for this factor in comparing the decisions and experiences of households both using and not using child labour. The research team used local definitions of poverty as well as direct observation of household assets in identifying and selecting case households.

In the case of the child labour households, the age of the focal child was to be between nine and 14 years old, or up to 18 years old if performing particularly hazardous work. Among the 11 cases were households with children who (i) worked full-time; (ii) combined work and school; and (iii) only attended school. Although the research team attempted to identify girls working outside the home in Koche Nasaji (the urban site), they were unsuccessful and instead selected two cases of girls performing home-based work. Case selection in Dashte Khushk (the rural site) focused only on boys working at the border, based on information from residents and NGOs active in the area that there were very few cases of girls working outside the home. This does not mean that there are no cases of girls working at the border (although this is likely to be quite rare), nor does it imply that there are no cases of female child labour among girls performing chores within their own or other people's households.

Table 1 – Household cases in Koche Nasaji and Dashte Khushk

Child	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Child labour/ non-child labour	Research site
Sadiq	14	Male	Tajik	Child labour	Koche Nasaji
Ahsan	13	Male	Tajik	Child labour	Koche Nasaji
Shahid	13	Male	Turkmen	Child labour	Koche Nasaji
Kubra	12	Female	Tajik	Child labour	Koche Nasaji
Shafiq	14	Female	Turkmen	Child labour	Koche Nasaji
Rukhshana	13	Female	Tajik	Non-child labour	Koche Nasaji
Saleem	12	Male	Tajik	Non-child labour	Koche Nasaji
Shakib	13	Male	Tajik	Child labour	Dashte Khushk
Fawad	13	Male	Tajik	Child labour	Dashte Khushk
Soliman	13	Male	Tajik	Child labour	Dashte Khushk
Bilal	16	Male	Tajik	Non-child labour	Dashte Khushk

Case households in both research sites were identified through initial referrals from local leadership, community elders, mullahs and teachers, and informal discussions with residents of both communities, followed by "snowballing" to select cases which matched the criteria. Obtaining consent and locating respondents for interviews presented significant challenges, particularly in Dashte Khushk, and will be discussed later in this section.

2.3 Methods and ethics

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and participant observation with parents and child labourers. The aim was to conduct two interviews of 1.5 to two hours each with the mother and father separately, and one interview with the focal child labourer (in the case of child labour households). In the non-child labour households, only the parents were interviewed. This methodology was not followed in all cases, because of one parent's absence due to death or long work hours (usually the father). In such cases, other influential male household members such as uncles or older brothers were interviewed, or only one longer interview was conducted with the respondent. In addition to the household interviews, key informant interviews were conducted with several members of the community, including local leaders, elders, mullahs and teachers.

The research team was sensitive to the ethical challenges involved in interviewing children and families about child labour, particularly with regard to questions about risks and hazards of work. To the extent possible, the research team interviewed child respondents alone in a private and comfortable setting, although this was not always possible due to the presence of family members, or the work schedule of the child. Prior to conducting the interview, the research team discussed an informed consent statement with respondents and ensured that they understood their right to withdraw consent at any time during the interview process without any repercussions.⁷ Each household was presented with a box of cookies as a token of appreciation for their time at the conclusion of fieldwork.

2.4 Methodological challenges

The research team encountered several challenges during the course of fieldwork, predominantly due to safety and security issues in both research sites.

All respondents reported perceptions of increasing crime (particularly kidnappings) and other illicit activities such as drug use and trafficking in their respective communities. General fear and suspicion of strangers as a result of such perceptions impeded fieldwork, as the research team at times encountered resistance to their requests for information regarding potential cases or were denied follow-up interviews. Saleem's mother cited insecurity as the main reason for her refusal to have a second interview: "Nowadays there is no security and I can't trust everyone who comes to my house." The team faced particularly acute fear and distrust of outsiders in the Islam Qala research site due to the prevalence of illicit activity such as drug trafficking and illegal migration to Iran.

Although villagers would speak generally about sensitive issues such as hazardous child labour or children in conflict with the law at the border, they were reluctant to identify specific children or households. Case selection and obtaining informed consent were therefore particularly challenging in Dashte Khushk.

Limited availability of some respondents due to work schedules also posed an obstacle to the research team during data collection. It was especially difficult to obtain interviews with male respondents, as many worked from early morning to late evening every day except Friday. The combination of insecurity and lack of availability meant

⁷ One respondent, Saleem's mother, did in fact exercise her right to refuse participation in a second interview.

that the research team had to make certain adjustments to methodology during the course of fieldwork.

First and foremost was the safety of the research team itself, which focused on keeping a low profile in the research sites and maintaining constant communication with security focal points in Herat and Kabul. The research team also attempted to alleviate respondent fears by emphasising the neutrality and independence of the study, and the confidentiality of the information disclosed. Respondents who could not have their interviews at home due to work schedules had the option of conducting the interview at their workplace or any other location of their choosing. If unable to have a second interview as directed by the study methodology, the research team attempted to cover as much of the information required in only one interview so as to limit the intrusion into the respondents' work and family lives. In both research sites, the team focused on building and maintaining positive relations with local leadership, necessary for eliciting continued cooperation and goodwill towards the study.

Finally, interviews often could not be conducted in a private and quiet setting, particularly in the case of female and child respondents. Respondents whose interviews were conducted at home were often accompanied by neighbours, relatives and children; this may have compromised confidentiality or biased responses to potentially sensitive questions.⁸ In addition to politely requesting to conduct interviews in private and being sensitive to the presence of other people at the interview, the research team carefully noted any observations of respondent behaviour and dynamics to use for data analysis.

⁸ In the case of one child respondent (Kubra), the presence of her mother and relatives during the interview clearly influenced and inhibited her responses.

PART I: Herat City

3. Research Setting

3.1 History and background

The neighbourhood of Koche Nasaji is located in the heart of Herat city within walking distance of the major commercial areas in town. The neighbourhood surrounds the remnants of a large covered market, which used to house a thriving wool industry but is now abandoned and in ruins. Neighbourhood residents report that homeless drug addicts take shelter in the remains of the market's mud rooms and use it for illicit activities such as drug dealing and usage (please see Box 1). During the Russian invasion and civil war, most residents of Koche Nasaji fled to neighbouring countries, in particular Iran, leaving the neighbourhood practically deserted until the fall of the Taliban in 2001 when the bulk of residents began to trickle home. On the outskirts of Koche Nasaji are three internally displaced persons (IDP) settlements, which are inhabited predominantly by people fleeing insecurity in Badghis, Ghor, Farah and districts in Herat province.

Box 1 – Drug dealing and addiction

While there is no reliable data on the prevalence of drug use in the area, respondents reported the presence of drug dealers and addicts as a significant risk to the safety and morals of the community, children in particular. Respondents attributed most criminal activity in the neighbourhood to drug addicts, and often cited fears of children being exposed to and influenced by drug use as a reason for keeping them constantly occupied with school or work tasks. The following statement by a respondent is typical of the concerns heard throughout the course of fieldwork:

I want my brother to go to school and study and avoid sitting or hanging around in the neighbourhood because he will be misguided or addicted to bad habits...there are many people in our neighbourhood that have become completely addicted to drugs, and I don't want my brother to become like them.

Interviews with staff of the Demand Reduction Action Team (DRAT)¹ in Herat confirm that the south-western part of the city where the research site is located has a reputation for large numbers of drug dealers and addicts. Findings from this study suggest that the prevalence of drug use in Herat is in large part due to the high number of returnees from Iran, where many were first exposed to drugs. This is supported by data from the 2005 Afghanistan Drug Use Survey, which estimates that up to 50 percent of drug users first started using drugs as refugees in other countries, particularly in Iran.¹ According to DRAT staff, opium, heroin and hashish are the most commonly-used drugs in Herat, with drug expenditures per user typically amounting to 50-100 Afs per day.

Due to its sensitive nature and the potential security risks entailed, the research team did not focus specifically on the issue of drug addiction, and only engaged in related discussions if the topic was first mentioned by the respondent. Interviews with one case household (Shahid) revealed that the father was a former drug addict who openly described his introduction to and experience with drug use. In contrast to his candour, his wife and son were silent on the issue of drugs, most likely due to the shame and stigma of having a former drug user in the household. While not the focus of this study, the admission by Shahid's father that a portion of his son's earnings was diverted to his drug expenditure suggests that drug addiction, particularly in the context of already insecure livelihoods, is a potential risk factor in the decision to send children to work.

Local leadership estimates the population of Koche Nasaji (excluding the IDP settlements) as somewhere between 500 and 600 households, the majority of which are Tajik. A large Turkmen population is concentrated in three parallel streets in the south-western part of the neighbourhood, which is socially, culturally, economically and linguistically distinct from the rest of Koche Nasaji. Almost all the Turkmen households engage in carpet weaving. A small minority of Hazara and Pashtun households, the bulk of which are recent returnees from Iran or arrivals from neighbouring provinces, also reside in the neighbourhood. The local leadership consists of two *wakil*'s who act as neighbourhood representatives to the municipality of Herat. One of the two *wakil*'s represents the Turkmen community in Koche Nasaji, which holds separate community meetings from the rest of the neighbourhood. There is also one traditional *shura* consisting only of male members, whose mandate is to resolve disputes within the community. The leader of this *shura* is also the mullah of one of the three mosques in the neighbourhood.

Koche Nasaji, like most parts of Herat city, has heterogeneous wealth distribution and living standards.⁹ Old mud houses can be found alongside three-story concrete buildings with luxury cars parked outside, and local leadership estimates that approximately 30 percent of the residents are considered "poor."¹⁰ Although Herat city generally offers basic services such as electricity, piped water, schools and health clinics, not all of its population can obtain or afford access. Box 2 describes the facilities available to the residents of Koche Nasaji.

⁹ Stefan Schutte, "Poverty Amid Prosperity: Urban Livelihoods in Herat" (Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2006).

¹⁰ Key informants described the characteristics of poor households in Koche Nasaji as including the following: reliance on irregular employment and income; without an adult male income earner; existence of household members with disabilities; and, unable to afford medical treatment or dinner every night.

*Box 2 – Basic facilities in Koche Nasaji***Electricity**

All case households have electricity in their homes, either through their own or neighbours' meters, but express concerns about the quarterly bill which often amounts to a month's income. Many of the households have fallen behind on their payments, and electricity bills are reported as one of the main forms of debt. The most common electrical devices are light bulbs, televisions and electric heating elements.

Water

The neighbourhood has access to different forms of water supply, including public wells and water pumps, private wells and the more recent option of piped water. Five of the respondent households rely on private wells for drinking water, while the remaining two have installed piped water in their compounds in the last two years. In the case of one household, the cost of installation (2000 Afs) was divided between the owner of the house and the resident household. Water consumption is measured by a meter and billed every two or three months.

Housing

Rental costs in the neighbourhood are high, ranging from 1,500 to 3,000 Afs per month for a two to three room house. Two of the households in our sample live in rented housing, which is a significant burden on their limited income sources and often leads to debt accumulation. Due to the high cost of living in the city, obtaining housing through social relations is a common strategy, with three of the households in our sample living free of rent in relatives' houses. Only two households own their homes, which were bought at least a decade ago using the old Afghan currency.

Healthcare

There is no healthcare facility in the neighbourhood itself, but residents can access an NGO-established health clinic located 10 minutes away by foot. The clinic, however, only administers first-aid and children's vaccinations, and is often crowded, so more complicated cases must be taken to the city hospital. Treatment of women and children at the health clinic is free, while men have to pay 5 Afs to receive treatment. There are also private health clinics in the surrounding area, but respondents report that the high cost prevents them from seeking treatment, even though they recognise the superior quality of care at the private clinics.

3.2 Educational options

The children of Koche Nasaji have a number of educational options available to them. Children can attend one of three government primary schools, all within 20 minutes on foot but located outside the neighbourhood itself: two of these are open only to boys, while the third teaches girls and boys in separate shifts throughout the day.¹¹ All the schools reopened after the fall of Taliban, and have recently undergone (or are currently undergoing) renovation. The principals and teachers of the schools reported a continued lack of space to accommodate all the students, as well as a need for more supplies and facilities such as books, computers and laboratories. One school recently received USAID funding to increase the number of classrooms. Another converted its school tents into actual classrooms with funds donated by a local businessman. The

¹¹ The two boys' schools have 5,519 students (grades 1-12) and 162 teachers (90 female; 72 male), and 3,637 students (grades 1-9) and 78 teachers (44 female; 34 male) respectively. The third school has 3,441 female and male students (grades 1-9; gender breakdown unavailable) and 57 teachers (34 female; 23 male). In order to accommodate the large number of students, the schools hold classes in several shifts during the morning and afternoon.

wakil and head of *shura* in Koche Nasaji reported having submitted a proposal to the department of education to establish a school within the neighbourhood itself, but has not yet received any feedback. Residents of Koche Nasaji also have the option of sending their children to schools outside the immediate vicinity of the neighbourhood, particularly to access secondary education. The availability of diverse educational options in Herat city means that residents can to some extent choose schools based on the quality of their classes and facilities.¹²

Apart from government and private schools, children in Koche Nasaji can attend two private centres which offer subjects such as literacy, English, computers, tailoring, and recitation of the Holy Koran. There is also a private kindergarten for pre-schoolers in the neighbourhood. Teachers report 300 to 400 students from both within and outside Koche Nasaji enrolled at each centre: approximately 60 percent of the students are boys, and the remaining 40 percent a combination of girls and young women. Classes take place six days a week from 7 am until 9 pm, taught by students who have either almost completed high school or are currently in university. The fees vary, but start at 100 Afs a month for basic English and tailoring, for example, and go up to 1,000 Afs per month for internet and computer courses. In addition to these two centres, there is a third targeting Turkmen children which charges fees on a sliding scale in order to accommodate poor households. This centre has partnered with an international NGO to conduct outreach to children working on the street and encourage their families to allow them to attend courses at the centre.

Religious education is very common in Koche Nasaji and constitutes weekly classes with mullahs at any of the three mosques. Learning to recite the Holy Koran is viewed as an important part of a child's education, and households generally try to afford the 10 Afs per child charged by the mullahs each week, particularly for their sons. Literate women also hold private, home-based classes on Koranic recitation in the neighbourhood.

3.3 Livelihood activities

Insecurity of work and income characterise the livelihoods of poor households in Koche Nasaji. Respondents report high unemployment and few opportunities for regular or salaried jobs: among the case households, only three individuals have salaried work.¹³ Hence, work in the informal sector – including casual wage labour and self-employment activities such as cart pulling and mobile vending – is one of the most common forms of livelihood activities among the less well-off in the neighbourhood. Such informal work activities are unreliable, irregular and competitive, with low incomes and high seasonal variance, meaning that households must constantly struggle to generate sufficient income for housing, food, transportation, medical costs and fuel. With highly variable earnings of between 50 and 200 Afs per day, households are under constant pressure to afford the high cost of living in the city. The continuing movement of returnees, IDPs and migrants from conflict and drought-affected rural areas to Herat adds further congestion to the job market in the city, resulting in high competition for employment opportunities.

¹² Saleem, for instance, has recently been accepted to a prestigious private high school for which he had to pass an entrance exam.

¹³ Sadiq's mother earns a salary of 2,500 Afs a month as a carpet weaver in a workshop and his sister teaches tailoring at a private centre in the neighbourhood for 1,000 Afs a month, although she plans to return to school next year; Ahsan's oldest brother earns a salary of 5,000 Afs a month as a police officer.

Given the proximity of Herat to Iran, male household members commonly respond to employment scarcity by migrating across the border to find work. All of the case households have had at least one male member migrate to Iran in search of more lucrative employment, and key informants describe remittances as an integral part of Herati households' livelihood portfolios. Several respondents also attribute the proximity of the Iranian border to the existence of drug smuggling and dealing activities among the residents of Koche Nasaji, although the prevalence of such illicit work is unknown.

Home-based production is another widespread form of employment, which is typically (although not exclusively) performed by women and children. Carpet weaving is extremely common, particularly among the Turkmen community in Koche Nasaji, for whom this traditional art form has been passed down through generations and constitutes an integral part of their cultural and ethnic identity (see Box 3). Respondents also report other home-based activities including cleaning and spinning wool, shelling pistachios and sorting seeds, but remuneration at only 10 to 25 Afs for a day's work is extremely low. Nonetheless, this contribution to the household income, no matter how meagre, can be essential to economic survival. Such home-based work also gives family members the opportunity to sit and talk with one another, thus providing a regular social support network, and the shells from the pistachios are a good source of fuel in the winter. Other female work activities include tailoring and house chores for other families, although the latter is generally frowned upon due to the gender norms restricting female mobility in the neighbourhood.

Box 3 – Carpet weaving

Home-based carpet weaving is the main occupation of the Turkmen community in Koche Nasaji. Known for their vivid colours and intricate designs, Turkmen-style carpets are typically woven by several family members simultaneously and can take from three to six months to complete depending on quality and size. The carpet is woven on a loom that belongs either to the household or to the person commissioning the carpet and weavers must crouch for up to 10 hours a day tying and knotting the wool yarn, often in dark and unventilated rooms. Several respondents who have been carpet weaving since childhood reported significant long-term damage to their health as a result of their work, mainly in the form of chronic back pain and arthritis.

Carpet weaving households engage in various cost and profit arrangements. One common arrangement is referred to as *nesfagee*, whereby the dealer commissioning the carpet provides the household with the raw materials and gives them half of the sale price upon selling the carpet. Another arrangement is to buy the raw materials on credit and repay the debt after the carpet has been completed and sold. Respondents engaged in carpet weaving often complained about the drastic decrease in profit margins over the years, prompting some individuals to cease their work altogether as the costs in terms of time, labour and raw materials are often not worth the income generated. Weaving a silk carpet on *nesvegee*, for instance, may take five to six months of work by two people, but generate only 5,000 Afs in profit. In spite of the marginal earnings, carpet weaving households that have relied on this livelihood activity for generations are often constrained in their ability to find alternative work activities. This is particularly true for women, whose mobility and livelihood options are constrained by norms of female seclusion. Only one of the respondents among the case households (Sadiq's mother) performs carpet weaving outside the home at a workshop in the city, where she enjoys a fixed salary of 2,500 Afs a month. This income, although low, at least provides some measure of security compared to those who are at the whim of fluctuating carpet prices.

There are several small businesses within Koche Nasaji itself: 15 basic grocery shops, two property dealers, two candy factories, one beauty parlour, one barbershop and one used goods shop. Only one of our respondents (Rukhshana's father) engages in

shop-keeping, but earnings, although somewhat stable, are often insufficient for household needs.

4. Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour

This section discusses the key findings from the household interviews, beginning with a brief overview of the seven household cases, followed by an analysis of the factors that influence decisions to use or not use child labour. These factors are grouped into four main categories: livelihood and economic insecurity; household composition and gender norms; work and school tradeoffs, including the influence of role models; and, learning as motivation for work. Households that do and do not use child labour are then compared to draw out key similarities and differences, paying particular attention to how variations in parents' attitudes and experiences can account for the different ways in which they consider the use of child labour in response to livelihood insecurity.

4.1 Key characteristics of cases

Table 2 contains basic information about the seven cases in Koche Nasaji. Of the five child labour cases, only one (Sadiq) combines work and school; the others have dropped out of school to work full-time. All the focal children in the cases are between the ages of 12 and 14, and are thus below the legal minimum age for employment in Afghanistan. In the non-child labour households, all children under 18 are enrolled full-time in school.¹⁴

¹⁴ The exception is Saleem's 15 year old sister who has never attended school due to epilepsy. Rukhshana's 16 year old brother attends 9th grade and works part-time at his uncle's pharmacy, but given his age and the light nature of the work does not constitute a child labour case.

Table 2 – Key characteristics of cases in Koche Nasaji

Child, sex and age	Ethnicity	Work activities (full/part-time)	Educational history
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS			
Sadiq male, age 14	Tajik	Apprentice in uncle's mechanic shop (part-time during school year, full-time during holidays)	Dropped out of school last year at 6th grade to attend INGO course; will re-enrol in school this year
Ahsan male, age 13	Tajik	Street vendor (full-time)	Dropped out of school last year at 4th grade
Shahid male, age 13	Turkmen	Apprentice in mechanic shop (full-time)	Dropped out of school four years ago at 3rd grade
Kubra female, age 12	Tajik	Pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based; full-time)	Never enrolled in school; attended NGO course until 2nd grade but may drop out this year
Shafiqa female, age 14	Turkmen	Carpet weaving (home-based; full-time)	Dropped out of school last year at 4th grade
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS			
Rukhshana female, age 13	Tajik	None	Enrolled in 7th grade
Saleem male, age 12	Tajik	None	Enrolled in 7th grade

4.2 Livelihood and economic insecurity

High unemployment and limited access to stable, well-paid employment characterise the livelihood profile of the case households (see Table 3). Only two of the seven child labour and non-child labour households have members with regular, salaried employment; the other five households depend on informal work activities such as carpet weaving, street vending, house cleaning, and shop keeping, with often very low and unpredictable income flows. Such work and income insecurity is cited by some respondents as one of the primary motivations for sending children to work:

My economic status was very bad and that is why I sent him to work instead of school.

—Shahid's father

If my children went back to school my economic condition, which is already weak, would become even weaker. Our problems will increase, that's why I pulled my children out of school, because of economic problems in the household.

—Ahsan's father

Table 3 – Household work activities and estimated income in Koche Nasaji¹⁵

Child, age and work	Household members' work activities	Estimated income (not including child labourer) ¹⁶
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Sadiq age 14, apprentice in maternal uncle's mechanic shop	Mother: works in carpet weaving workshop Eldest sister: teaches tailoring at a private centre Eldest brother: mechanic apprentice Younger brother: mechanic apprentice	2,500 Afs/month; workshop closed during winter 1,000 Afs/month; plans to return to school next year 1,200 Afs/month 500 Afs/month
Ahsan age 13, street vendor	Father: unemployed Eldest brother: police officer Brother-in-law: snack vendor Older brother: street vendor	No income 5,000 Afs/month (diverted to debt payment) 1,500 Afs/month 500 Afs/month
Shahid age 13, apprentice in mechanic shop	All: carpet weaving	1,000 Afs/month depending on material costs and sale price
Kubra age 12, pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based)	Grandfather: wage labourer Uncle: wage labourer Father: wage labourer in Iran All: Pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting	1,500 Afs/month 1,500 Afs/month One remittance of 50,000 <i>toman</i> 1,000 Afs/month
Shafiq age 14, carpet weaving (home-based)	Mother: carpet weaving; does house chores for others; sells handicrafts Eldest son: unemployed, occasional wage labour	1,000 Afs/month; 200-400 Afs/month plus free food and clothing; 50 Afs/month No regular income
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Rukhshana age 13, in 7 th grade	Father: shopkeeper Mother: occasional carpet weaving	1,500-2,000 Afs/month 500 Afs/month
Saleem age 12, in 7 th grade	Mother: does house chores for others Rental income	2,000 Afs/month 4,000 Afs/month (diverted to debt repayment)

Due to the limited and low-paid employment opportunities in Herat, all case households have at some point resorted to labour migration to Iran, most commonly to engage in wage labouring.¹⁷ Illegal migration to Iran, however, is a costly and risky endeavour often involving the use of smugglers. Sadiq's father, for instance,

¹⁵ Income figures are estimates based on information provided by the respondents.

¹⁶ The estimated income per month per capita of the respondent households ranges from 321 Afs to 1,000 Afs. According to data from the 2007 National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (as cited in the ANDS), 42 percent of the population lives below the poverty line with incomes of about 708 Afs or 14 US dollars per month per capita. The per capita incomes of the respondent households therefore point to extreme levels of poverty and vulnerability.

¹⁷ At the time of fieldwork, Kubra's father and uncle were working as wage labourers in Iran and had sent one remittance home so far.

disappeared attempting to cross the border eight years ago and has never been found. Several respondents also reported a recent crackdown by the Iranian authorities, which has led to decreased work opportunities for undocumented Afghan workers as well as more frequent deportations. In spite of the enormous risks involved, illegal migration to Iran remains a common coping strategy, illustrating the desperation experienced by some households in the face of scarce employment opportunities in Afghanistan. Kubra's grandmother lamented: "Our country is not a country. Otherwise, why do my sons have to go to Iran to work?"

Household livelihoods are further strained by the high cost of living in Herat city. Table 4 shows the regular expenses of households which most commonly involve housing rent and electricity, but can also include water, fuel, daily consumption, medical treatment as well as debts. Many respondents referred to the unusually harsh winter that year which resulted in reduced work opportunities along with increased heating and medical costs:

We can't afford to buy firewood. Even this winter we had nothing for fuel in the house ... This winter was very difficult, the house was very cold and all my children got sick. It was the worst winter. My children got sick one by one and I couldn't bring them to a doctor.

—Ahsan's mother

Several respondents also lamented the prices of basic food commodities, which at the time of fieldwork were increasing in the context of the global food crisis:¹⁸

Interviewer (I): *What will you do when the flour and the firewood has run out?*
Respondent (R): *I am also wondering now, because the prices of those things have risen considerably. I can't even buy bread from the bakery, it is now 8 afs per piece. I am thinking about what meals I can make today ... a few days ago, we also ran out of oil and rice, so we bought it on credit.*

—Rukhshana's mother

Table 4 – Household expenses and debt in Koche Nasaji

Child, age and work	Household expenses	Debt
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Sadiq age 14, apprentice in maternal uncle's mechanic shop	Housing: no rent, lives with maternal uncle Electricity: none (uncle pays) Water: none (uncle pays)	500 Afs/month to shopkeepers for consumption
Ahsan age 13, street vendor	Housing: 1,500 Afs/month in rent Electricity: 2,000 Afs/month Water: none (access to well)	Owes rent; 100,000 Afs in livestock trading losses
Shahid age 13, apprentice in mechanic shop	Housing: own house Electricity: unknown amount Water: none (access to well) Drug use: father used to spend 20 Afs/day on drugs but quit two months ago	Owes electricity bill; 5,000 Afs to shopkeepers for consumption

¹⁸ IRIN, "Afghanistan: Rising food prices push two million into food insecurity - WFP," <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=76219>, 14 January 2008, (accessed 14 July 2008).

Child, age and work	Household expenses	Debt
Kubra age 12, pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based)	Housing: 3,000 Afs/month in rent Electricity: 1,000 Afs/month Water: 750-1,000 Afs/month	1,000 Afs to shopkeepers for consumption; 10,000 Afs for medical treatment
Shafiqa age 14, carpet weaving (home-based)	Housing: no rent, but must move if relative returns from Iran Electricity: 1,000 Afs/month Water: none (access to well)	2,500 Afs for electricity bill; 1,500 Afs to shopkeepers and neighbours for consumption
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Rukhshana age 13, in 7 th grade	Housing: none, lives with paternal uncle but may have to move if house is sold Electricity: unknown amount Water: none (access to well) Shop rent: 3,000 Afs/month Medical treatment: 700 Afs/month	10,000 Afs to uncle for start- up costs of shop Unknown amount to shopkeepers for consumption
Saleem age 12, in 7 th grade	Housing: own house, but under family dispute Electricity: unknown amount Water: unknown amount	200,000 <i>toman</i> to <i>sarafi</i> (informal money lender); 6,000 Afs for house repairs

The powerful effects of such shocks illustrate the marginality of the case households' livelihoods, and the extent to which they are vulnerable to even small events such as a minor illness. As Shafiqa's mother explains, the combination of a doctor's visit and daily consumption needs can be sufficient to exhaust the household's limited resources:

I wonder how I will manage my life. Yesterday I took my son to the doctor and I was also sick and went to see the doctor. I spent 300 Afs on treatment and medicine: 250 Afs for myself and 50 Afs for my son. I bought one man (4 kilos) of flour for 100 Afs, one can of tomato sauce, and one box of washing powder. Now no money remains so I am wondering how we will live.

— Shafiqa's mother

Households often cope by meeting some of their needs through credit. All case households report having some level of debt due to ill health, house construction or investment, and several buy basic goods on credit from shopkeepers through well-established credit relations. Debt is a common component of poor households' livelihoods portfolios,¹⁹ and in extreme cases can act as a driver for child labour. Ahsan's father, who is in debt of approximately 100,000 Afs in total from losses in livestock trading, links the need to pay his creditors to the decision to pull his sons out of school to work as street vendors. Although his eldest son earns a regular salary, it goes entirely toward debt repayment, so his younger sons must work to support the household:

¹⁹ Floortje Klijn and Adam Pain, *Finding the Money: Informal Credit Practices in Rural Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2007)

My eldest son is working as a police man and he gets 5000 Afs per month. The money which he brings home I give directly to my creditors. I pulled my other two sons out of school and sent them to the street for vending. The money which they bring home is used for household consumption only.
— Ahsan's father

Crippling debt has also forced Ahsan's parents to take the drastic measure of marrying their 11-year-old daughter to the creditor's son in place of repayment and to briefly contemplate selling their five-year-old son last winter:

I: So what happened to your family six months ago? You married off your daughter six months ago and also your sons started working six months ago - did anything happen at that time?

R: There was nothing at home at that time and we were at a complete loss as to what to do. And I was sick.

I: What do you mean when you say there was nothing at home?

R: To be honest with you, this winter we did not even have a piece of bread at home some days. My children went to sleep on an empty stomach. My husband even decided to sell one of my sons and once he took my son to the bazaar but no one wanted to buy him. My husband was ready to sell his son.

I: What did you say about this?

R: Nothing. I agreed that we had to do this.

— Ahsan's mother

Ahsan's household exemplifies how the combination of low income, debt and unexpected shocks can result in the decision to send children to work or take even more extreme and irreversible measures. The chronic livelihood and economic insecurity present in all the cases in the study — both child labour and non-child labour — are vital considerations for poor households negotiating their present and future welfare. However, the existence of poor and indebted households that choose not to put children to work suggests that poverty is not necessarily the only or primary determining factor leading to child labour. Saleem's household, for instance, must spend their entire rental income on debt repayment, leaving only Saleem's mother's meagre income as a house cleaner for household expenses. In spite of the challenges of being a single mother of five children, Saleem's mother has so far resisted child labour as a potential response. Further discussion of Saleem's household and the different ways in which it has attempted to cope *without resorting to child labour* can be found in Section 4.6.

Economic reasons for work type decisions

Economic factors can also play a part in decisions around which type of work activity children should pursue. Shahid was sent to work as a mechanic's apprentice instead of continuing his family's traditional employment of carpet weaving in an attempt to diversify income streams and thus increase household livelihood security. This effort to reduce livelihood risk, however, comes at the cost of Shahid's education and potentially his physical and psychosocial well-being.²⁰

²⁰ Please see Section 5 for a further discussion of Shahid's case.

At that time Shahid was unemployed so we were talking about sending him to work somewhere. Because we were already three of us weaving at home, and there was not room for one more, so we wanted to find something for him outside ... at that time, carpets were cheap and there were not many people to buy them, so we did not earn very much. That is why we thought that we should send one to work somewhere else.

—Shahid's mother

Similarly, Ahsan's father would like his younger sons to stop street vending and look for more profitable work in order to be able to afford consumption needs as well as contribute to debt repayment.

I: Why don't you want them to continue selling potatoes and onions on the pushcart?

R: Because it doesn't make us any profit. They earn only enough money for household consumption and to buy more potatoes and onions for next time. We can't save anything for paying back the debt. By vending potatoes and onions they can earn only 60-70 Afs daily in total. So I haven't made any profit from this work and I would like them to change the work.

—Ahsan's father

Ahsan's household suffers from extreme poverty and debt, making it the most obvious example of economic motivations for child labour. Even in this case, however, the decision to send children to work (and the choice of work activity) is a conflicted one. In the following exchange, Ahsan's mother begins by stating that her decisions around appropriate work activities for her sons are driven solely by earning prospects. Upon further questioning, though, concern for her children's well-being emerges as a competing priority:

I: What kind of work is suitable for them?

R: Every kind of work that makes them get some money...in general whatever work that can make more money is best until we can pay back our debts.

I: For example, if you compare wage labouring with working in a mechanic shop, which is more suitable for your sons?

R: Working in a mechanic shop is more suitable if we can find the opportunity.

I: But it makes less money than wage labouring?

R: It is more suitable even it makes less money ... because compared to wage labouring, working in a mechanic shop is easier [her eyes filled with tears]. I would ask them what kind of work they would like to do and then I would send them there.

—Ahsan's mother

She goes on to describe the dilemma of balancing immediate survival needs of the household with the desire to educate her children:

On the one hand going to school is important. But when I look at my life and see that there is nothing for the household to eat, I realize that earning money is also important, so I am wondering which is better for them to do. I still think it is better to combine work and school for as long as the situation allows. Whenever we become compelled we will have to take them out of school and ask them only to work for our survival.

—Ahsan's mother

The internal struggle described by Ahsan's mother suggests that even under conditions of dire poverty, the decision to put a child to work is difficult and tempered by competing priorities such as the child's safety and welfare. Other non-economic motivations for sending children to work and in what kind of activity, as well as the strategies that households use in attempting to reduce exposure to risks and hazards, will be discussed in Sections 4.5 and 5.5 respectively.

Children's contribution to household livelihoods

The importance of the children's contribution to their household livelihoods and the extent to which they have access to their earnings vary widely across the five child labour household cases (see Table 5).

Table 5 – Children's estimated earnings and usage in Koche Nasaji

Child, age and work	Estimated earnings	Use of earnings	Child access to earnings
Sadiq age 14, apprentice in maternal uncle's mechanic shop	200 Afs/week (uncle reports 300 Afs/week); lunch provided at shop	Gives to mother for household consumption	Approximately 70 Afs/week for public bath, clothing, school supplies, etc.
Ahsan age 13, street vendor	100-140 Afs/week	Gives to father for household consumption	None
Shahid age 13, apprentice in mechanic shop	400-500 Afs/week; lunch provided at shop	Gives to father for household consumption and debt repayment; also 20 Afs/day on drugs until father quit two months ago	Given 10-20 Afs/week for public bath, etc.
Kubra age 12, pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based)	40-60 Afs/week	Household consumption	None
Shafiq age 14, carpet weaving (home-based)	250 Afs/week (aggregated from carpet sale profit per month)	Household consumption	Mother promised to give her 1,000 Afs from the next completed carpet

In Shahid's case, his income of 400-500 Afs per week makes him the primary income earner, particularly given the meagre income from his family's carpet weaving work:

Shahid's work has helped our economic situation a lot. Before my pockets were empty of money, I didn't even have 100 Afs. Now he brings home 400-500 Afs per week and I can repay my debts so nowadays no one is coming to

my door to ask about their money ... he helped my livelihood so much because I was not able to afford supporting my family by myself.

– Shahid's father

However, In spite of Shahid's substantial contribution to his household economy, his parents only allow him to keep 10-20 Afs a week for his personal needs. The majority of his income goes to household consumption and debt repayment, and until recently some amount was diverted to paying for his father's drug habit of approximately 20 Afs per day:

I: Where did you find the money to buy the opium?

R: I used the money earned from carpet weaving and also by Shahid...sometimes I bought drugs on credit and when Shahid brought money home at the end of the week, I would take 80 Afs to pay the drug dealer and thank him for giving me the drugs on credit.

– Shahid's father

Sensitivity and safety concerns prevented the research team from probing further into the link between Shahid's father's drug use and the decision to send Shahid to work, but it is likely that expenditure on drugs further strained the livelihood of the household by consuming already limited resources. Drug addiction may also have played a role in preventing Shahid's father from pursuing higher-paid work outside the home, thus compelling his son's employment.

The incomes of Ahsan, Kubra and Shafiqa – while not as large as Shahid's – nonetheless constitute a significant contribution to their households' livelihood portfolios. Ahsan's earnings, as described previously, help to pay for household consumption. In Kubra's case, the larger the group weaving carpets, the more income collectively earned. . In Shafiqa's case, the profit from carpet weaving depends on a quick turnaround, which is facilitated by Shafiqa working alongside her mother:

The carpet would be finished earlier if Shafiqa weaves with me than if I was weaving alone...if Shafiqa and I are working together, in one day we can weave this much [showing the width of one outstretched hand and four fingers of the other hand] in one week. But if I were alone, I would only be able to weave this much [showing the width of four fingers on one hand] in one week.

– Shafiqa's mother

Neither Ahsan nor Kubra receive any of their earnings and Kubra is not even able to spend 20 Afs a month to attend a literacy course, due in part to the large number of school-aged children in the household who would all want to attend the course as well. Her grandmother states: "the money from working is not given to the children." In Shafiqa's case, there appears to be more evidence of negotiation between Shafiqa and her mother regarding the use of their carpet weaving income for Shafiqa's personal needs. Shafiqa describes negotiating with her mother to receive a substantial portion of the expected income from the carpet they are currently weaving and how she plans to spend the money:

My mother promised to give me 1,000 Afs of the income from this carpet. Then I will go to the bazaar to buy something for myself. She didn't give me any money from the previous carpet but this time she should give me some money from the carpet. Now I would like to buy nail polish, lipstick,

*hair clips and bracelets for myself. [Showed us three fake gold bracelets]
My mother bought these for me but I would like to have more.*

— Shafiqa

In contrast to the four other cases of child labour, Sadiq's mother claims that her son's income is a negligible contribution to the household and is used primarily for his own expenses such as school materials, clothing and snacks:

The money that Sadiq earns is not sufficient for household expenses like coal or food, but it does pay for the boy's stationery expenses. It is more of a help for himself, so he can go and buy some snacks or something on Friday, or I can buy trousers for him with the money he earns. I might even be able to buy some clothes for his sister. The burdens on my shoulders have not become the slightest bit lighter because of his working.

— Sadiq's mother

The motivation for Sadiq's work, therefore, does not appear to be household survival, but more related to affording school supplies and other personal items. Sadiq's case is unique in its combination of work and school and in its illustration of the complex interaction of non-economic motivations for work, of which further discussion can be found in Section 4.6.

4.3 Household composition and gender norms

Table 6 shows the size and composition of each of the seven case households. Four of the five child labour households and both of the non-child labour households are composed of either nuclear or single-parent families (with the exception of Ahsan's household which also includes a son-in-law); Kubra's household is particularly large and consists of three generations. Two of the child labour households and one of the non-child labour households are headed by a single female. The table also includes information on the activities of all the children in the households: of the 32 children in the child labour households, only five attend school full-time while the others either work full-time or combine work with school.

The composition of the household unit — particularly the age and gender of its members — can have significant impact on decisions around whether children should work, which children should work and what work type is appropriate. The absence or frail health of the male head of household, for instance, can be instrumental in the decision to put children to work. In two of the five child labour households, the male head of household has been absent for many years due to estrangement and death, respectively. Both focal children from these households make an explicit link between their need to work and the absence of their fathers:

If I had a father and if he was working, or if my brothers had a permanent job, then I would only go to school and not weave carpets. But now both girls and boys should work until we find a piece of bread. Whenever one of our relatives invites us to a wedding party, I need to have a new dress and a new scarf. If I don't weave carpets then how can I get those things for myself?

— Shafiqa

Illness or frail health of the male head of household can also contribute to the decision to send children to work. Shahid, for instance, has assumed the primary responsibility for supporting the household due to his father's weak physical condition (possibly related to his former drug use), which prevents him from performing heavy labour.

Although Shahid's father, mother and sister engage in carpet weaving, it does not generate sufficient income for consumption needs as well as debt repayment.

Table 6 – Household characteristics of Koche Nasiji

Child, age and work	Household size and composition	Status of male head of household	Work and school activities of siblings
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS			
Sadiq age 14, apprentice in maternal uncle's mechanic shop	8 people: mother and 7 children	Father disappeared 8 years ago while attempting to migrate to Iran for work	Sister (age 17) teaching tailoring at learning centre, will return to 8th grade next year; sister (age 16) attending 10th grade; brothers (ages 15 and 12) working part-time as mechanic's apprentices in uncle's shop; brother (age 10) attending 3rd grade; sister (age 9) attending 2nd grade
Ahsan age 13, street vendor	12 people: parents, 8 children, married daughter and son-in-law	Father present and well, but unemployed	Sister, (age 20, married) never went to school; brother (age 16) working as police officer, attended literacy course till 4th grade; brother (age 14) working as street vendor, dropped out at 4th grade
Shahid age 13, apprentice in mechanic shop	6 people: parents and 4 children	Father has frail health due to illness and drug addiction; only weaves carpets as unable to perform heavy labour	Sister (age 16) does carpet weaving and house chores, never went to school; brother (age 12) working as mechanic's apprentice, attending 3rd grade; brother (age 10) attending 3rd grade
Kubra age 12, pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based)	14 people: grandparents, 6 children, 5 grandchildren and 1 daughter-in-law (Kubra's mother)	Grandfather is elderly and weak; father working in Iran	All siblings and aunts (ages 10 to 20) doing home-based work, were attending literacy course; uncle (age 15) does wage labouring, never went to school; uncle (age 14) attending 8th grade; uncle (age 12) doing home-based work, was attending literacy course
Shafiq age 14, carpet weaving (home-based)	4 people: mother and 3 children	Father estranged for many years and died 5 years ago	brother (age 16) unemployed, dropped out at 2nd grade; brother (age 12) working as carpenter's apprentice and attending 4th grade
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS			
Rukhshana age 13, in 7 th grade	5 people: parents and 3 children	Chronic health problems requiring frequent medical treatment	Brother (age 16) attending 9th grade and English course, works part-time in uncle's pharmacy, income used for school materials and courses; sister (age 10) attending 5th grade
Saleem age 12, in 7 th grade	6 people: mother and 5 children	Father died one year ago	Sister (age 15) never went to school due to epilepsy; sister (age 14) attending 7th grade; sister (age 10) attending 6th grade; brother (age 7) attending 2nd grade

The absence or ill health of the male head of household cannot explain all cases of child labour, however. The fathers of Ahsan and Kubra are present and well, with the latter sending remittances from Iran. In the case of Shafiq, her older brother was put to work at a very young age, in part due to the absence of their father, but at the age of 16 is now beginning to assume the responsibilities of the head of household. It is also striking that the two child labour households headed by a single female — Sadiq and Shafiq — are the ones that demonstrate great sacrifice and willingness to bend gender norms in order to keep at least one child, if not all, in school. Sadiq's mother insists on keeping all of her seven children in school, and works outside the home in a carpet weaving workshop in order to do so. Due to her close relationship with her brothers, she is able to breach without censure the gender and seclusion norms that prevent many women in Afghan society from working outside the home:

R: [Sadiq's mother] is working in a carpet weaving factory. But the thing is that she works very hard and she should get more pay, the work she does is also harmful for her health. She has got children to look after but she is obliged to work.

I: Did she ask you when she found this work?

R: Yes, she asked me and I discussed with my brothers and all of us came to the decision to let her work there even though we were not happy with it. She said that we also have to look after our family and have children to support, so she doesn't want to take support from us forever.

— Sadiq's uncle

Shafiq's mother has also assumed the role of breadwinner since her long estrangement from her husband, but this is becoming threatened as her eldest son becomes more attuned to community norms and expectations regarding women's work:

During the last one and a half years since my son has been jobless, I have been working in other people's houses. But now he doesn't allow me to go. He says to me that it's not good for me to go outside because then other people would say things to him ... he tells me that people look at him and say that he is a big boy but his mother is the one who goes out to work. It is shameful.

— Shafiq's mother

Saleem's household is the third in our sample headed by a single woman. Saleem's mother has worked as a domestic servant since the death of her husband one year ago, but does so in secret due to fear of the backlash that may result from the violation of female seclusion norms. In spite of the shame and threat to family reputation — amplified by her status as the widow of a mullah — she continues her work in secret in order to keep her children in school and out of work. This example of a female-headed household that has managed to avoid putting children to work is an indication that the absence of a male income earner does not necessarily result in the decision to use child labour.²¹

Household composition — in particular, the age and gender of children in the household — can also determine who gets sent to work and in what type of activity. Ahsan's case suggests that birth order matters in decisions around which child should work, with the eldest son as the most typical choice:

²¹ Please see Section 4.6 for further discussion of Saleem's household.

R: It is true that Ahsan will go wherever we ask him to go and work. But now we want to send his brother to the mechanic shop because he is older...I would not like to take Ahsan out of school.

I: Why his brother?

R: Because he is the older one and physically he is stronger than Ahsan and can take responsibility for his work.

– Ahsan’s mother

The notion of sacrifice is prevalent in discussions around birth order, education and work. Rukhshana’s father himself dropped out of school to work in order to allow his younger brothers to be educated, a past sacrifice that he links to the current sacrifices he makes for the good of his children:

I was the oldest brother and I had to work so that they could go to school. Occasionally my brothers forget those times and I have to remind them that if I had not worked, then they would never have become educated. I tell them such things in a joking way, but they understand that their brother sacrificed his life for them.

– Rukhshana’s father

Societal norms in Afghanistan tend to cast males in the role of future breadwinners and females as the bearers of family honour. Boys, then, are more likely to work outside the home for pay while girls are more likely to perform household chores and/or home-based economic activity that allow adherence to female seclusion norms:

If the family needs them to work, it would be better to take the boys out of school and send them to work because they are boys and would be able to find work...the sons should go out to find work and earn money for household consumption.

– Ahsan’s mother

While the above quotation suggests that boys are at greater risk of being pulled out of school to work, this does not necessarily imply that girls are more likely to be enrolled or kept in school. Decisions around work and school tradeoffs are influenced by the interaction of a variety of factors including but not limited to gender, and are a reflection of the difficult choices that poor households are forced to consider within a context of insecurity and uncertainty. The following section discusses parental attitudes towards education and the variables that feed into decisions regarding work, school or a combination of both.

4.4 Deciding between work and school

All of the case study households (with the exception of Saleem’s, whose recently deceased father studied until 12th grade and was a mullah) have limited experience with formal education (see Table 7). Parents (mothers, in particular) were deprived of formal educational opportunities in their youth as a result of many of the same obstacles still faced by their children today: gender-based seclusion norms; loss of the male head of household; and poverty. Several parents also refer to the hardships of growing up in the period prior to and during the Russian invasion, when conflict and migration made it impossible for them to pursue their education.

Table 7 – Education of parents and focal child in Koche Nasaji

Child, age and work	Parents' education	Child's education
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Sadiq age 14, apprentice in maternal uncle's mechanic shop	Uncle: 4th grade in Iran	Dropped out of school last year at 6th grade in order to attend an INGO-established course; will re- enrol in school this year
Ahsan age 13, street vendor	No formal education	Dropped out of school last year at 4th grade
Shahid age 13, apprentice in mechanic shop	No formal education	Dropped out of school four years ago at 3rd grade
Kubra age 12, pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based)	No formal education	Never enrolled in government school; attended NGO-established course for two years until 2nd grade, but may drop out due to inability to afford fees
Shafiqa age 14, carpet weaving (home-based)	Father (deceased): no formal education Eldest brother: 3rd grade	Dropped out of school last year at 4th grade
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Rukhshana age 13, in 7 th grade	Father: 2nd grade Mother: no formal education, but taught herself how to read	Enrolled in 7th grade in government school
Saleem age 12, in 7 th grade	Father (deceased): 12th grade; was a mullah	Enrolled in 7th grade at free private school (had to pass entrance exam to be admitted)

Benefits of education

Parental respondents unanimously express regret over their lost opportunities for education and value its importance for leading a successful and comfortable life. The quotations below illustrate the respondents' sense that their lack of education has impeded their ability to obtain salaried employment and enjoy a higher standard of living, and, in the case of Sadiq's mother, achieve a sense of personal accomplishment:

Education is better than work, people used to be shepherds or farmers before but now it is a pen that can take you wherever you want. It provides you with a good income and easy opportunity for work. If I were an educated person I would not have such a life as I have now.

— Ahsan's father

I complained about my own position – of what I had achieved so far over the last 30 to 35 years. If I had been educated, I would be able to have a good job now, for instance in an office – at UNHCR. Or I could have been teaching now...

– Sadiq’s mother

Parents tend to equate education with literacy and numeracy, and recounted many examples of the ability to read and write as an essential life skill. Most basically, they recognise the importance of literacy for reading signboards and locating addresses; literacy also played a role in perceptions of “a good Muslim,” as it enables one to recite the Holy Koran and perform prayers. Particularly significant given the prevalence of labour migration to Iran is the ability to read letters from family members. As Kubra’s grandfather explains, the value of education not only accrues to his literate son, but also to the entire household and community:

His studies are very important for the household, because before when I received a letter from my other son in Iran I would take it to someone else in order to read it for me, but now Maruf reads and writes the letters from my son in Iran. First it is very important for himself and then for the whole family as I told you...one day he will read and write letters for Muslims. This is a big advantage for him and for everyone in the neighbourhood.

–Kubra’s grandfather

For Ahsan’s mother, literacy is also valuable for jobs such as a mechanic or shopkeeper, as it helps to protect against being cheated or exploited:

Even if he goes to a mechanic shop to learn a skill, it is still necessary for him to read and write. For example, if he is repairing something at the mechanic shop and needs to read what is written on a package, he will need to be literate. If you can’t read and write, maybe if you want to buy something from a shop and the shop owner gives you something of poor quality, you will not be able to read and see that it is not of good quality. But if you can read, then you will be able to get the higher quality things.

– Ahsan’s mother

The empowering effect of education resonates with many of the respondents, who link their illiteracy to feelings of dependence and “blindness.” Sadiq’s uncle also views education as a means of expanding horizons and diversifying one’s options to include the world outside Afghanistan:

I: What are the pros and cons of education for a person?

R: A person who goes to school, it doesn’t have any cons for him because if I knew English language I would be able to work in foreign countries. I have a job offer from a person in Dubai but I’m not going to go because I don’t know the language.

I: Why do you need to know English?

R: If you don’t know this language you will be misused by the owner, because you won’t understand what he is saying and talking about.

– Sadiq’s uncle

Reflecting his broad outlook on the world, Sadiq’s uncle also links education to the achievement of national aspirations for peace and development:

I: What things are important for children to learn?

R: Well, I would suggest education once again because if we compare our country with other developed countries like Japan or others we will see that we are very behind and have done nothing to establish our country. This is only possible with education. We need educated people to serve our country but unfortunately we are following other ways, everybody came and misguided us and we fought with each other, when in fact all of us were brother and sister.

– Sadiq's uncle

Work and school as competing priorities

All respondents are thus aware of and able to describe in concrete terms the benefits and value of education. Yet faced with many of the same economic pressures, some choose to send their children exclusively to school or to work, while others (Sadiq) find ways to combine both.

Work and school can become competing priorities due to extreme economic constraints, employer pressure or the inability of the child to balance the demands of both activities. Shahid's father, for instance, views work and school as a zero-sum game in the context of their economic insecurity:

Their father says, if they go to school, then what will we eat?

– Shahid's mother

The conditions imposed by his employer further threaten the possibility of Shahid continuing school:

R: For one month he both went to school and went to work...then one day the master told me that my son had come late, at 2 o'clock. He said that if Shahid continued to come at this time, then he would not learn anything. I told the master that Shahid had been tired that day. But the master answered that he should choose between school and work.

I: So what did you say?

R: The master said that if I wanted my son to learn this skill, then I should pull him out of school. He said that when he was an apprentice, he was working day and night, and even on Fridays. He said that if I wanted my son to learn this skill, then he should only work in the mechanic shop. He said that if my son only goes to the shop in the late afternoon and evening, then he would never learn the skill. Then I said to myself that if my son doesn't work hard like his master, then he won't become anything. So I pulled him out of school.

– Shahid's mother

The fatigue that results from combining work and school, as mentioned by Shahid's mother, can also compel the child to choose one over the other.²² In the case of Sadiq's household, it is his eldest brother who wishes to drop out of school in order to work full-time, against the wishes of his mother:

R: Even now he sometimes doesn't go to school. When I get to know this, I start trembling in all of my body. I feel some kind of bad feeling in my

²² Further discussion of the educational, physical and psychosocial impacts of work can be found in Section 5.

heart [her eyes fill up with tears]. Most mothers in this neighbourhood might not care about the education of their children, but not me, I can't see my children drop out of school.

I: Does he say that he would like to just work and quit school?

R: He says that he can't go ahead with two types of activities at the same time, going to school as well as working.

— Sadiq's mother

Even in cases where children must work, however, work and school need not be framed as competing activities if the employer is sensitised to the importance of education and willing to be flexible about the child's schedule. In contrast to Shahid's employer, for instance, who forces Shahid to choose between work and school, Sadiq's employer ensures that Sadiq and his brothers are able to stay in school, even if it means they are sometimes late or absent from work. The ability of working children to also pursue their education therefore depends heavily on the awareness and flexibility of employers.

Evaluating the costs and benefits of work versus school

All case households report facing work-versus-school dilemmas, yet respond to them in different ways. One of the ways in which households may decide how to respond is by weighing the costs and benefits of school, and increasing or limiting their investment in education based on the potential for returns in the future. As described above, a key expected return on education is the increased possibility of obtaining high-paid employment, which will in turn benefit the household:

I would like my children to go to school so that they are able to find good work with good salary in the future.

— Ahsan's mother

I think if they were to go to the course until they have learnt the subject well, they would be able to establish their own centre for teaching courses, and it would be useful not only for themselves but also for the household.

— Sadiq's mother

Future returns may not only be in the form of a high salary, but also in terms of job security. Given Afghanistan's precarious job market, permanent and salaried employment is particularly coveted:

R: One will do teaching, one will find a job at the government. It would make me happy to see them in such jobs. I would like them to be independent.

I: Governmental employees always complain about their low salaries: why do you think it is good to work for the government?

R: Working for the government at least secures a fixed salary...I tell them that they should finish their schooling and then perhaps they will become government employees.

— Saleem's mother

Families are more likely to invest in their children's education if the expected returns are high, or at least greater than the immediate returns of involving children in work. Many of the respondents, though appreciative of the value of education on a

theoretical level, are also aware of the factors that can reduce the possibility of returns on their educational investment.

One key constraint is the poor quality of schools. When teachers are unmotivated or unqualified and learning is not taking place, it is unlikely that families will feel inclined to invest in their children's education:

To be honest with you, Shafiqah went to school for a while, until 3rd or 4th grade. The first time you came to my house I told you that Shafiqah never went to school...she has studied up to 4th grade but I didn't lie to you, she can't read or write so what was the benefit of going to school? (emphasis added)

— Shafiqah's mother

I: But does school not have any benefit?

R: I do not know. He does not learn the subjects well. He just goes there and comes back again. If he would go to work and learn something, it would be better.

— Shahid's mother

High unemployment in Afghanistan is another contextual factor that decreases the possibility of future returns on education. As noted in Section 4.2, all case households face livelihood insecurity, in large part due to the lack of employment opportunities in Herat city. If the labour market is perceived to be saturated — even for qualified individuals — then the incentive to invest in education may be reduced. In evaluating work and school tradeoffs, respondents consider not only their own experiences, but also the education and work outcomes of other people in their social network:²³

Now we understand, one of my brothers-in-law has studied a lot, but he still does not have a good job - he is neither a doctor nor an engineer. What good does it do to study that much if you cannot get a job?

— Shahid's mother

There are some boys in Herat who have finished 12th grade, but did not have any practical skills and are now unemployed.

— Sadiq's mother

Such examples illustrate that the cost-benefit analysis of work versus school does not occur in a neutral space, but is instead influenced by the broader economic and employment context of Afghanistan.

Ethnicity and perceived or actual discrimination may exacerbate these kinds of job market concerns. Ethnic discrimination is a significant issue for the two cases of Turkmen households. For Shahid's mother, the incentive to invest in her sons' education is diminished by the perceived barriers against Turkmen people. The following exchange illustrates her belief that this discrimination puts her children at an even greater disadvantage in an already constrained job market:

R: I would like my sons to become something. But no Turkmen who has finished school, even past 12th grade, has ever become anybody! Even boys who have studied do not succeed.

I: How come they do not succeed?

²³ The importance of role models will be discussed further in Section 4.4.

R: When a Turkmen goes to seek a good job, he will never get it...my husband said that even if Turkmen children went to school, they would never become a teacher or doctor in the future.

I: Why not?

R: I don't know. Some of Shahid's father's relatives studied and finished 12th grade, but they couldn't find a job...Turkmen people say that the government does not offer opportunities to the Turkmen to become something. But if Herati people study then they can become something like a teacher or doctor, but not Turkmen people...Shahid's father's brother-in-law studied for many years and even knows how to speak different languages but he couldn't become anything. So our relatives say, what is the point of going to school?

— Shahid's mother

Decision-making around work and school is also gendered. Given the prevailing gender norms which prevent many women from working — particularly after marriage, when they generally move out of their natal home — some respondents see little value in educating their daughters:

I: In a little while, when they have grown a little older, we'll sell them (meaning that they will be married and the household will receive their bride price.)

R: How come you are going to sell your daughters and Rafi should study till tenth grade?

I: Because the girls will be married soon and they will live with some other family, whereas the boys will stay with us ... Boys have futures! Girls will soon be given to the in-laws! [Laughing] And the boys will soon have to earn money for us.

— Kubra's mother

I: What about your daughter, why is she not in school?

R: Well, this is because she is a girl and also Turkmen people do not like to send their daughters to school.

I: Why is this, can you explain a little more?

R: Sure, the girls have to go to their husband's house one day, if we spend money on their studies, what will we gain from it? Nothing. So it's better to keep them at home to do the house chores.

— Shahid's father

Given the many factors that may reduce the likelihood of children — and by extension, their households — reaping the rewards of an educational investment, some parents may not be willing to take the risk. This is particularly true since school-related costs such as textbooks, notebooks, pens and uniforms are a burden on already stretched resources. In Kubra's case, school costs are pivotal to whether or not she can continue her education:

R: I don't know if I will go back to the course or not.

I: Why?

R: We don't have money. If I go to the course for one month, then what would we eat?

I: It is only 20 Afs, no?

S: If this course gave us some pencils and notebooks like they did in the past, then we could go and continue studying ... But if the course asks for 20 Afs and doesn't give us notebooks and pencils, then we can't afford it.

– Kubra

In addition to direct costs, the opportunity cost of sending children to school when they could be earning much-needed income may be considered too large to bear. Kubra's grandfather, for instance, values the immediate gains of having a practical skill as compared to a long-term educational investment in an uncertain future:

It's good to learn different kinds of skills. It is good to even learn how to repair shoes because then you can sit in the street and do that work and earn 20 or 30 Afs to buy food. Sometimes having skills is more important than having an education, because with education you cannot find a job as quickly as when you have a skill. When you have a skill you can start working any time you want. For example, if a person can sit in the street and repair shoes, he is not educated but he can support his family.

– Kubra's grandfather

Faced with such work versus school dilemmas, Sadiq's mother has chosen to hedge her bets by having her children combine work and school. Sadiq's mother and uncle are committed to keeping him in school, but also realize the value of learning a vocational skill as a safety net in the event that his education does not lead to secure employment:

I: Do you want Sadiq too have a shop in the future or would you prefer him to be an educated person?

R: If he fails to be something in the future then he will need to have a skill to support his family.

– Sadiq's uncle

Households may also try to maximize their options by allocating some children to work and others to school. As discussed in Section 4.3, factors such as birth order and gender play key roles in decision making around labour and resource allocation. The ability and interest of the child in school is another important consideration when deciding who should work and who should study. Given limited resources and the uncertainty of future returns, Shahid's father has chosen to invest in the child who demonstrates the most talent and drive among his three sons:

I: How is your youngest son with his studies?

R: He is very interested in school and he always gets good marks.

I: What plan do you have for your sons?

R: I want Shahid and his brother to work so that my youngest son can go to school and become something in the future. That way, he will be able to support the family in the future, and he can help his brothers when he becomes something...I say to Shahid and his brother that they serve the household now, but the youngest will serve the household in the future.

– Shahid's father

The preceding analysis suggests that poor households, when confronted with the choice between work and school, weigh the costs and benefits in the short and long-term. Based on this assessment, they attempt to make strategic choices to maximize returns within the context of extremely limited options. The decisions made by respondents to keep their children in school, put them to work or combine the two appear to be influenced by variables including: cost and quality of school; ethnic discrimination; gender norms; likelihood of future employment; and the relative interest and ability of the child in education.

Community norms and role models

Calculation of expected material returns, however, is not the sole driver of household decision-making around work and school. With regard to girls' education, for instance, many of the respondents reported concerns about girls being in the public view and subject to the gaze of boys and men. Such risks to family reputation and honour may trump any potential returns on educating girls. In some cases, therefore, gender norms rather than minimal expected returns from educating girls are more influential in the non-enrolment or low retention of girls in school. In the two cases of child labour involving girls, however, it appears that parental preference for investing in boys' education (in Kubra's case), and poor school quality and ethnic discrimination at school (in Shafiq's case) are more significant constraints to schooling than gender-based seclusion norms.

The enhanced status and reputation derived from being an educated professional also appears to encourage some households to invest in their child's education. The benefits of being a respected member of the community can either be enjoyed by the child itself, as described by Sadiq's mother, or by the parent, as desired by Shahid's father:

Now, all my brothers are mechanic masters but still people think more highly of teachers and they are more respected than my brothers who have worked hard all their lives. They do not get any credit for their deeds...I would like my own children to be famous, because they are hard working and they should be recognized for the work that they do.

— Sadiq's mother

He would become educated and become a doctor or whatever he likes to be. And the benefit for the family would be that people would say: "Khalil's son is a doctor or engineer," and this would be the benefit for me.

— Shahid's father

Similarly, the fear of being blamed by their children in the future for not sending them to school — or the potential shame of being viewed as negligent parents by others in the community — can form part of the motivation for some parents to pursue their children's education:

We who did not study, and who only know our own prayers, do not want them to turn around and ask us tomorrow why we did not send them to school ... When people will ask my children if they know their prayers, they will be able to say yes. But if people ask them if they can read and they have to answer no, then it would be embarrassing for us.

— Kubra's mother

The influence of others in the community — particularly community norms related to gender — is further exemplified by some respondents' references to role models (or the lack thereof) in their social network. In the case of Saleem's mother, a positive role model for whom education resulted in professional, salaried employment persuades her to keep her son in school in spite of the economic pressures that sometimes lead her to consider otherwise:

In the family where I work, there is a son who has finished 12th grade and is now working with the UNHCR. He earns a monthly salary of 500 dollars and speaks English and knows computers. I tell myself that one day perhaps, Saleem will be able to do the same thing if he studies until 12th grade.

– Saleem’s mother

Conversely, Shafiq, who stopped school at 4th grade to weave carpets full-time, feels little motivation to remain in school when everyone in her peer group has dropped out to weave carpets. The powerful influence of gender and community norms is particularly rooted in ethnic identity in the case of the two Turkmen households, a reflection of the tight-knit and closed Turkmen community in Koche Nasaji:²⁴

We Turkmen people don’t like to go to school. All my female relatives, my paternal cousin, my maternal cousin...all of them stopped schooling and are now weaving carpets at home.

– Shafiq

Yet, as Shahid’s mother notes, the emergence of a single role model from the community could create a ripple effect that would change people’s perceptions of the possibility of success through education:

If one or two people from the Turkmen community became something like a doctor or engineer, then other Turkmen people would be inspired to go to school and become something too.

– Shahid’s mother

4.5 Learning as motivation for work

Respondents identify learning as a strong motivation for the decision to send their children to work, and in particular for the choice of work activity. Given the unpredictable returns on an educational investment, some households prefer that their children learn a vocational skill which will afford them a more reliable livelihood in the future. The opportunity to learn a skill is one of the reasons why apprenticeship is often a more attractive option than street vending, for instance, which Ahsan’s mother recognizes as a merely short-term solution to their acute poverty:

I don’t think they will learn anything from vending. Vending is not the kind of work that has a future. If we sent them to vend, it was just for survival, so they can earn some money for the household...the only benefit of such work is surviving.

– Ahsan’s mother

At the time of the interview, Ahsan’s parents were making arrangements to place their eldest son in a mechanic shop as an apprentice. Compared to vending, being a mechanic is seen as a proper vocation that will provide her son with a stable source of income in the future. For Ahsan’s mother, learning a skill is a better investment than formal education in the context of her household’s realistic long-term prospects:

Mechanic shop is good and he would learn mechanics skill for his future because working as a mechanic is a real profession. It is the kind of work which is beneficial for the future. If he works in a mechanic shop, then he

²⁴ Please see Section 3 for more information on the Turkmen community in Koche Nasaji.

would be able to learn a skill perfectly, then he would be able to open his own mechanic's shop in the future if he needs to have a source of income.

– Ahsan's mother

Respondents also viewed work as a way for children to learn essential life skills for making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Sadiq's mother identified learning a sense of responsibility through managing the expenditure and saving of earnings, for instance, as an important outcome of work:

When they were smaller and took their weekly pay from their master, they used to buy snacks with that money. Then I told them off about having spent that money wrongly, and that they should save it to buy something for themselves instead. Now they have changed. When their uncles give them their weekly money, they save it, and do not spend it on snacks or sweets. They were small at that time. Now they know better, they understand that their mother works from morning until evening and they themselves also work now. That is why they tell me that they will not spend their money like they did before.

– Sadiq's mother

Interestingly, obtaining a skill and thereby equipping oneself with the ability to support a family can also be viewed as a sign of manhood and readiness for marriage. Shahid's mother describes below the change in attitude towards marriage that she has observed in her son since obtaining a skill and earning a regular income:

Nowadays he spends more time in front of the mirror to make himself look good. Before when we used to joke with him about getting married, he would refuse outright and would ask from where we would find the money for him to have a nice wedding. However, now, whenever we talk about it, he smiles and no longer asks about the cost. I think, as he has learnt to do mechanics well and is earning a little bit of money, he no longer doubts where the money for the wedding will come from.

– Shahid's mother

As in many societies, marriage in Afghanistan is an important milestone marking one's transition into adulthood. While not the focus of this study, further research on the social and cultural constructs of childhood and adulthood in Afghanistan would contribute to an understanding of the role of work in children's development.

Girls' work is perceived primarily within the context of preparing them for their future roles as wives and mothers. Families teach daughters how to perform household tasks such as tailoring and cooking to ensure that they will know how to contribute to their marital household, and therefore reflect positively on their natal family's reputation.²⁵

It is also a skill to shell pistachios because then she will get used to work. Then she can become a responsible mother...for the future of girls, cooking and tailoring are very important because they will be going to another house. This is our tradition: a girl must know one of these skills so that when they go to their in-laws' house they will not face any problems. Otherwise the in-laws will say, why doesn't this girl know how to cook or

²⁵ The reflection of the daughter's behaviour on the reputation of the mother and natal family is also found in Deborah Smith, *Love, Fear and Discipline; Everyday violence toward children in Afghan families* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008).

have skills like tailoring? They will say that the girl's mother was lazy because she did not teach her daughter how to cook or sew clothes.

– Kubra's grandfather

Even for girls, having a productive skill can act as a safety net for the future:

Everyone should try to learn this skill (carpet weaving). When I get married in the future, maybe I will need this skill and it will help me.

– Shafiqa

Finally, not only is work perceived as a means through which children learn essential vocational and life skills, it is also seen to keep them occupied and protected from negative influences and dangers.²⁶ Many respondents expressed dismay over the deteriorating security conditions in Herat, and particularly feared the perceived increase in kidnappings and vices such as drug abuse. The imperative to protect family reputation also plays a large role in keeping children off the streets by engaging them in work activities, as seen in the decision to send Shahid's younger brother to work as an apprentice:

I: Why did you send Shahid's brother to do this work?

R: He was hanging around in the street. Day by day the number of boys hanging out on the street increases. I thought to myself that if he got used to just hanging around and learned bad habits from other boys, it would damage the reputation of our family.

– Shahid's mother

Sadiq's mother is also concerned with the exposure of her sons to negative behaviours, particularly given the absence of their father. Her decision to send all three sons to work as apprentices in their uncles' mechanic shops is in part driven by her desire to provide them with a father figure who will offer the appropriate discipline, supervision and guidance. As she explains, the future welfare of her children depends largely on the experiences and lessons of their present:

No one is aware of the future. But I think their future will depend on two things: one is their fate, and the other is how they spend their youth.

– Sadiq's mother

This deep mistrust of leisure and free time is understandable within the context of rampant insecurity and crime in Herat city, and is testament to the love and protectiveness demonstrated by many parents. However, this culture of caution has important implications for children's ability to engage in leisure and play, which is mandated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and recognised to be crucial to children's physical and psychosocial development.²⁷ The issue of leisure and recreation exemplifies the challenge in balancing universal values with culturally specific attitudes, particularly in a context of conflict and insecurity.

²⁶ The preoccupation with ensuring children are not "idle" is also found in Paula Kantor and Anastasiya Hozyainova, "Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Kabul" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008); Smith, *Love, Fear and Discipline*.

²⁷ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), Article 31.

4.6 Key differences between non-child labour and child labour households

The two non-child labour households in our sample face many of the same pressures and dilemmas as the households that have chosen to put children to work. Rukhshana's household relies on the meagre income from the father's shop, and to a much lesser extent, the earnings from the mother's intermittent carpet weaving. Saleem's household is solely dependent on the single mother's domestic work for other households. Both non-child labour households are also burdened with significant debt and have ill or absent male heads of household.

However, while child labour and non-child labour households must contend with the same livelihood insecurity, the latter has thus far succeeded in doing so without the use of child labour. The following discussion highlights the key differences exhibited by the households of Rukhshana and Saleem, paying particular attention to the ways in which they respond to risk. Although Sadiq's household is considered to use child labour, it will also be discussed here as it shares many of the same characteristics as the non-child labour households, and is the only case of a child combining work and school. Box 4 summarises the key characteristics of these households, which distinguish them from their child labour counterparts.

Box 4 – Key characteristics of non-child labour households

- Greater commitment to education, in part due to parents' regret over their own lost opportunities for education
- Greater knowledge of and reference to positive role models of educated and successful individuals
- Personal and family sacrifice, most notably women working in spite of strict gender codes, in order to keep children in school
- Awareness of the roles and rights of children, including greater commitment to gender equity and more consideration of children's interests and desires
- Different perceptions of short-term and long-term risks and benefits
- Greater demonstration of agency and creativity in keeping children in school
- Greater access to and reliance on help networks and relations

Commitment to education

Non-child labour households exhibit greater commitment to education, not only in rhetoric (as is often the case in the child labour households) but also in practice. Rukhshana's parents and Sadiq's mother and uncle are unique in their interest and involvement in their children's schooling, and regularly inquire about school progress, help with homework and meet with teachers. Saleem's recently deceased father had a 12th grade education (the most educated by far of all the respondents), was a mullah, and was actively engaged in giving his children religious instruction and helping them with their schoolwork. Sadiq's mother and Rukhshana's parents are also extremely proactive in finding their children extra-curricular activities. Sadiq's mother identified a free English course at the governor's office for her eldest daughter but was ultimately unable to afford the transportation costs. Rukhshana's brother takes English and Karate lessons; Rukhshana herself takes tailoring lessons and learns English from her brother. Rukhshana's mother even taught herself how to read and write by helping her children with their homework, although she herself has never had any formal education. This "can-do" spirit – unique to the non-child labour households – will be discussed in greater detail later in the section.

While all the respondents express regret over their incomplete education, Sadiq's mother and Rukhshana's parents in particular seem to feel this loss most poignantly, and as a result are determined to keep their children in school. Sadiq's mother feels deep anger and disappointment at not having been able to attend school because she was a girl, especially since she was always extremely enthusiastic and interested in learning:

If I had been literate; I would not have been in this situation. [Once again tears rolled from her eyes] Before I got married, I was very clever, I learnt to do most things fast. When my brothers were working on the cars, I used to help them, I would open things and screw things. I also used to make curtains for the windows or seats for the cars. All the work of my six brothers and my one sister was always less than what I did. [Weeping] But now...I am nothing...I wanted to study until 12th grade, but it did not work out. [Weeping and drying her eyes] I was the first child in my family, but was not allowed to go to school by my eldest brother. If I had gone, I would never have had such bad luck.

– Sadiq's mother

Similarly, Rukhshana's father recounts numerous instances of having been embarrassed, shamed or held back by his lack of education. He explicitly links his own experience to his determination to educate his children:

I got the idea about the importance of education through my own experience. When I was going to Iran, I was stopped by the police check post and asked different questions but I was giving the wrong answers. There I understood the importance of education and that my problems were because of illiteracy. If I knew reading or writing I would not face such problems. Another time when my family sent me letters in Iran I had to take them to friends to read them out for me. I felt very sad about that because my personal information was being spread among my friends. Another day I could not find wage labouring work. The person who was employing people asked me if I could write or read and if I could then I would be hired here. I became very sad and said no, I cannot write or read anything because I did not go to school. So I left that construction company and went to a place where many wage labourers were standing looking for work. There I thought if I went to school, then I would find work very easily and the work would not be very heavy, so that's why I got the idea to send my children to school.

– Rukhshana's father

Exposure to positive role models

The households of Rukhshana, Reza and Sadiq also uniquely demonstrate their greater knowledge of and reference to positive role models in their social network who have achieved professional success as a result of their education. Rukhshana and Reza have positive role models even among their own family members; Rukhshana's uncles are all educated and work as pharmacists and Reza's father was a mullah. Sadiq's mother recounts family success stories from countries such as Saudi Arabia, where her second cousin is the president of a university. Interestingly, Rukhshana's father and Sadiq's mother have even themselves become role models for others in the community, which suggests the part that they and others in their situation can play in being a catalyst for change among their neighbours, relatives and friends:

One day I had a discussion about this matter with my neighbour, he was sending his son to do painting work. The boy was 14 or 15 years old and I asked his father what benefit his work would have for his family. I told him to send him to school instead of work. My neighbour was educated and working in an animal health clinic. Then he started thinking deeply and kept silent.

– Rukhshana's father

Now when those people see me on the way they tell me that they regret not having sent their own daughters to school in the past and that their daughters are illiterate while my daughter is a teacher.

– Sadiq's mother

Exposure to other countries through migration – a variation on the concept of role models – also significantly influences attitudes toward education. In the following statement, Rukhshana's mother uses her experience in Iran to affirm her belief that a child's right to education should not be denied even in situations of conflict and insecurity:

We went to Iran. There, all men and women are literate. They know everything. All places are not like Afghanistan, war-ridden and without luck. In other countries both women and men are literate. Just because bad things happened to us does not mean that the children should not study. I hope there will be peace and calm for some time for this country to get better, so my children, both boys and girls, can study and their futures will be better.

– Rukhshana's mother

Sacrifice and gender norms

The non-child labour respondents demonstrate great personal and family sacrifice in order to ensure their children's education. Rukhshana's father made the decision to repatriate his family to Afghanistan, thereby giving up plentiful work opportunities and a higher standard of living in Iran because the Iranian government closed the Afghan refugee schools. Also, as described in Section 4.3, the mothers from the two non-child labour households are willing to risk their reputation and honour in order to diversify income sources without resorting to child labour. Reza's mother goes so far as to keep her work as a domestic servant secret from her neighbours, for fear of the potential damage to her and her family's reputation:

*I: Why did you say that your neighbours should not know that you go to work?
R: Because I do not want them to tell my children that I am working in other people's houses. If people say such things to them, then they will be ashamed and I do not want that. Their father was a big man, he was a mullah and people will not accept that his wife will make the family ashamed.*

– Reza's mother

Rukhshana's mother also experienced considerable distress from her decision to disregard gender codes for the sake of contributing to the household income:

Once my mother-in-law asked me to wash their clothes for them because we really had nothing at home...I felt really bad afterwards, I washed my

brother-in-law's underwear! We people think that it is not good for a woman to wash the clothes of a single man.

Later in the interview she discusses the pain caused by years of carpet weaving:

R: Do not talk to me about pain. I have pain in my back and in my shoulders and I always wear stockings underneath my trousers to keep warm. My hands sting.

I: Why is that?

R: Because I sit in the same position every day, and my hands move in the same way all the time. Tying the knots has made the tips of my fingers numb. But I do not have a choice, it is a kind of help...I know it is a very little amount, but it comforts me to know that I am giving a little help to the household economy.

— Rukhshana's mother

Similarly, the commitment demonstrated by Sadiq's mother to support her household and keep her children in school (albeit in combination with work) illustrates that gender norms, while powerful, are not insurmountable barriers to women's work. Sadiq's mother has pursued multiple work activities in the eight years since her husband disappeared, including pistachio shelling, seed cleaning, tailoring and carpet weaving. Most recently, she started working in a carpet weaving workshop in the city, where she receives neither food nor transportation costs and must work without heating during the winter. Her determination to keep her children in school by engaging in diverse work activities, often simultaneously, contrasts with Shahid's mother who demonstrates less willingness to pursue other income-generating opportunities besides home-based carpet weaving:

I: What about yourself, did you ever look for work besides carpet weaving?

R: I would like to find some work and do it. But their father does not allow me to do this. If I go outside, then it will also be to weave carpets. People say that weaving carpets outside the home is very hard, and that they do not even allow you to drink a glass of tea. But the children's father does not allow me to go, as he tells me that the work there is too hard.

I: What about other kinds of work, like cleaning wool?

R: Turkmens do not clean wool, but Hazaras who live further up in town, they go to clean wool.

I: What about some kind of work, which you could do from home, like shelling pistachios or knitting socks?

R: I do not know how to knit socks and shelling pistachios does not give a profit. One man of pistachios only gets 20 Afs - what can you do with 20 Afs?

— Shahid's mother

Awareness of children's role and rights

The willingness to bend gender norms corresponds with an unusual commitment to gender equity. Unlike the child labour households, which differentiate between girls and boys in either word or deed, Rukhshana's mother insists on treating her daughters and sons equitably. When asked if she would take her daughters out of school in order to save more money for her son's education, she replied:

No, I do not want to discriminate between my daughters and my son. This goes for everything, even for food. My daughter should eat as much as she wishes

to, not that she should eat less than my son because she is a girl. No, I do not do that. All of them are my children. If I discriminate between them, then my daughters will complain about their parents not paying attention to them because they are girls. Then they will just want to avenge themselves and the love between us will be in danger. So, I try to behave as equally as possible with all of them. For example, if I divide something into three parts and give the largest part to the boy, then Rukhshana will complain about this to me. I do not want my daughters to feel sad just because I only have one son.

– Rukhshana’s mother

Rukhshana’s father is also equally committed to his daughter’s education and links his ambition for Rukhshana to become a doctor to the need for more educated, professional women in Afghanistan. Similarly, Sadiq’s mother expresses pride in having educated daughters and constantly explores means of expanding their educational options. It is important to note, however, that upon further questioning, both Rukhshana’s mother and Reza’s mother revert to more traditional conceptions of gender roles. Their responses indicate that the education of boys is of greater importance due to their role as future breadwinners and decisions regarding girls’ education and work are, upon marriage, the domain of their husbands. The contradictions apparent in many of the respondents’ statements regarding girls’ education and work suggest changing norms around this sensitive issue, and the conflicting feelings evoked by such change.²⁸

Nonetheless, non-child labour households demonstrate greater awareness of the role and rights of children. Rukhshana’s father views studying as the only role or “job” of the child, while his wife explicitly states that her daughters “have the right to go to school.” Sadiq’s mother also articulates her hope for all children to be respected and valued. Indicative of her distinctive outlook, she is the only respondent who identifies psychological or therapeutic benefits of literacy:

I: I understand that you wish your children to succeed in something that is respected in society, is that correct?

R: I do not wish this to happen just for my children, but that all children should be respected. I myself have produced things that could have been impressive...but no one knows me for my art, I will not be famous for my carpets, even though it is good work. Now, you are holding a book in your hand, and wherever you go people will respect you because you can write with your pen. You can write down your thoughts and troubles and you can write down those of others. If I had been literate, even though I would be weaving carpets every day or just a housewife, I would still have been able to note down my thoughts, feelings and problems, and I could empty my heart to the paper.

– Sadiq’s mother

Their awareness of children’s rights coincides with a greater consideration of their children’s desires and feelings regarding school and work. Saleem’s mother, struggling with the burden of being a single mother, is considering sending her oldest son to work but has not done so because of his strong, negative reaction to the idea of discontinuing school. She describes herself as “heartbroken” when she sees her son cry and becomes even more determined to do whatever she can to keep him in school.

²⁸ Further discussion of changing norms around gender can be found in Smith, *Love, Fear and Discipline*.

This attentiveness to a child's rights and preferences contrasts with the child labour respondents, none of whom refer to the rights of the child and instead are more likely to view their children as economic or labour assets. Shahid's father, for instance, describes his three sons in economic terms:

Shahid's work has 100 percent benefit for me and for the entire family, and if I send his brother as well then it will be 160 percent profit, and if I send the third it will be 200 percent profit.

– Shahid's father

Similarly, Ahsan's father views the marriage of his 11-year-old daughter, which he arranged with his creditor in return for cancelling his debt, purely in terms of profit and loss:

The advantage of my daughter's marriage was that I got rid of the debt and the disadvantage was that I married my daughter off without getting a bride price.

– Ahsan's father

Later in the interview, when asked how he decided to try to sell his youngest son instead of the older two, Ahsan's father replied:

They [his older sons] are older now and they can work, whereas the five year old boy needs food and is good for nothing right now. We have to work to buy food for him.²⁹

– Ahsan's father

Different perceptions of risk

The non-child labour and child labour households also demonstrate different perceptions of risk. Rukhshana's father views education as a safety net that, although unable to contribute to household livelihood in the short-term, is a means of security in the event of unforeseen shocks:

This is to let them have a bright future. Let me give you an example: if you are an educated person and you become disabled, you can still find work through your pen. But if you are uneducated and you become disabled then you will not be able to find work apart from begging on the street.

– Rukhshana's father

Sadiq's mother regards short-term and long-term tradeoffs similarly, and constantly reminds her sons that "there will always be work, but school is only for a short time in life." She also gave up the opportunity to enjoy greater livelihood security in Iran with her maternal relatives, because "they [her children] might be hungry here in Afghanistan but they can study, whereas in Iran they would not be able to study!" Her commitment to expanding the horizons of her children is exemplified in the following statement, where she clearly prioritises educational opportunities over material needs:

My children are interested in learning things about the world, not my

²⁹ Ahsan's household is an extreme case of acute poverty and indebtedness, and highlights again how individuals in a context of deprivation and limited alternatives can be compelled to take desperate measures with long-term and irreversible negative effects on children.

pockets. They do not wish for new clothes or better food. We have not seen meat for a long time, and they do not eat breakfast - this is not what they wish for, they just want to go to courses!

— Sadiq's mother

Rukhshana's parents also perceive the risks of their children working as too high in terms of the long-term impact on physical health. Both parents suffer from chronic aches and pains — the father as a result of his many years of manual labour and the mother because of her carpet weaving — and thus do not want their children to be in the same condition in the future. Unlike the mothers of Shafiq and Kubra, Rukhshana's mother rejects carpet weaving and other home-based work such as wool cleaning due to their harmful physical effects:

R: I do not like my girls to weave for a long time.

I: Why is that?

R: Because she is small now and she might very well suffer the same pains as me if she were to weave regularly.

I: What about some home-based work, like shelling pistachios or cleaning wool?

R: No. We would not like our daughter to clean wool. Those who clean wool get hands like this. [Holding up her fists as if they had become stiff] We say that we will tolerate all kinds of problems, but we will not tolerate that our children work.

— Rukhshana's mother

For the parents of the non-child labour households, therefore, the risk of potential long-term harm to their children outweighs the immediate but short-term improvement to the household economy should they choose to use child labour.

Agency and creativity

The degree to which individuals demonstrate a sense of agency distinguishes the households which use child labour from the ones which do not. Although Sadiq and his brothers work part-time, their mother insists that they remain in school as well and expresses great strength and courage in doing so despite her position as a single mother. Again, the language of children's rights is used here to justify the hypothetical defiance of an employer or male family member:

There are some apprentices who work full time, but perhaps the families of those boys do not care about education. If the master would not accept the half-day agreement, then they should leave the mechanics' shop, but they should not leave school! If the master does not allow my sons to go to school because of work, then I tell you, I will go and talk to that man whether he is my husband, my brother or anyone else! No one should have the right to prevent children from going to school.

— Sadiq's mother

By contrast, Shahid's mother, when confronted with an employer who presented work or school as an ultimatum, felt powerless to challenge his authority (in spite of the fact that he was merely 18 or 20 years old). Instead she chose to take Shahid out of school. Shahid's mother expresses a similar sense of resignation regarding school costs: "If we can then we buy those items, if we do not have the money then we just do not do it." Unlike respondents from child labour households — who cite the cost of school

materials as a barrier to their children's education — Sadiq's mother and Rukhshana's mother find inventive ways to overcome such obstacles:

My daughter told me how many books she needs so I am looking around to find books among my neighbours whose children might have read these books last year. I will not take all the books from one family, but see if I can gather a set of books for her through different ways.

— Sadiq's mother

R: The school expenses are nothing! We are only talking about some pencils and notebooks, and I will try to get these from wherever I can. The clothes that they wear to go to school would be the same as they would wear to stay at home.

I: But you could save the money spent on pens and notebooks for the HH consumption.

R: No, what difference do 20 or 30 Afs make? What should I do with that? God is rich and he will provide for us. Last night Rukhshana stayed up until 10 at night, tearing all the unused paper from the notebooks from the previous years. She stapled together all the blank sheets and made five or six notebooks.

— Rukhshana's mother

The sense of agency demonstrated in particular by Rukhshana's mother and Sadiq's mother contrasts with the fatalism, pre-determinism and hierarchical mentality expressed by some child labour respondents. As explained by Shahid's father and Kubra's grandfather, fate determines the extent to which one is educated (and can therefore obtain salaried employment and a "good future") as well as wealth and class:

It would be difficult for Shahid to work and study because his master complained about it once and said he should either come to work or go to school, so I told him to go to work and let the wealthy people go to school and serve their country. Those who have more money can study, but poor people cannot send their children to school. So I send my son to work instead of school.

— Shahid's father

There is a big difference among the educated and uneducated boys. Educated boys have good futures, but here I want to say one thing: God has not created everyone equal. You will find different kinds of people, some eat by their pen and some make their living from other activities.

— Kubra's grandfather

Help relations and networks

Finally, the households of Rukhshana and Sadiq are unique in their access to and reliance on help networks and relations. Rukhshana's household has been able to manage livelihood risk without resorting to child labour in large part due to assistance from Rukhshana's paternal uncles. As the eldest son in the family, Rukhshana's father sacrificed his own education in order to work and support his younger brothers through school. Now that his brothers are successful pharmacists, they provide some assistance to his household primarily through supporting his 16-year-old son's education (providing him with a part-time job at one of their pharmacies, the income from which goes to his school costs, paying for him to take an English course and buying him a

computer). Rukhshana's uncles also occasionally give the household food items and old clothing. Similarly, Sadiq's household relies heavily on Sadiq's maternal uncles, who provide Sadiq and his brothers with part-time jobs and pay for a substantial portion of their household expenses. The strong help network that Sadiq's and Rukhshana's households can turn to in case of unexpected shocks means that they have a social safety net that precludes the need for full-time child labour. Reza's household, on the other hand, is quite isolated due to a family feud and as such has much more limited help relations. This may in part account for Reza's mother beginning to consider sending her son to work.

Threats to the non-child labour household

All three mothers in the households of Sadiq, Saleem and Rukhshana recognise that their aspirations for their children's education and future are fragile and constantly under threat. Sadiq's mother, for instance, knows that in spite of all her efforts, her children would have to drop out of school to work full-time if she were to lose her job, or fall ill and become unable to work. Saleem's mother – already showing the strain of supporting five children on her own – is considering sending her oldest son to work and has refrained so far only because of his intense negative reaction to the prospect of leaving school. Any shock to this household's precarious livelihood would likely shift it from a non-child labour to a child labour household. Finally, Rukhshana's mother – again demonstrating her insight and outlook on the world – is able to abstract out of her own existence to consider the more contextual challenges of conflict and insecurity in Afghanistan. Her reflections on the political instability, criminality and insecurity in the country, and the threat they pose to the actualisation of her and her children's aspirations for the future, are extremely astute and worth quoting at length:

I think if the situation is like it is now, they will not be able to succeed in finishing school and becoming a doctor or teacher. There are kidnappings, suicide attacks and insecurity. In this kind of situation, I do not think that they will be able to make it. We are worried, just about them going to school and coming back. But we send them to school to have a future, so that their futures will not go bad. When the girls go to school and until they come back, my heart will always be beating wildly [she thumps her chest with her hands]...yes, our lives have passed, but we hope that the government can do something about the future. It is good that the government sends people like you to ask about the opinions of families. But where is the government and where is the security that we need? We do not have security and the number of addicted people has increased. The government does not pay attention to these matters and that is why it is getting worse. One of our relatives lives in the next alley, and they had gone somewhere for a month. When they came back they found that all the electrical wires had been stolen. So where is the security and stability? In Afghanistan there are no grand robberies like in films where they rob banks, here people just steal from each other's houses. This is why I cannot leave the house, even if our relatives ask us to come and see them, I will have to stay at home. It is true that we do not have many things here, just old mattresses and a dirty carpet, however I need these things and if someone takes them from us, then what will we do?

- Rukhshana's mother

The households that have managed thus far to keep their children in school share unique characteristics that enable them to respond differently to livelihood risk and insecurity than households using child labour. However, these are not immutable child labour or non-child labour traits *per se*, but rather responses that can change

depending on the context and the resources of the household at any given time. As the case of Saleem's household suggests, households that do not currently use child labour may be pushed into doing so at some later stage due to an unforeseen livelihood shock or, as Rukhshana's mother describes, a deterioration in the overall security situation in the country. Households that survive without resorting to child labour, therefore, do so under extremely precarious conditions and must be provided the appropriate support in order to fulfil their hope of a brighter, more secure future for their children.

5. Experiences and Impact of Child Labour

This section focuses on the experiences and effects of work among the children in the child labour cases, and assesses the interaction of risk and protective factors that make some children more vulnerable to harm than others. Finally, the section ends with a description of aspirations for the future, and discusses their feasibility given contextual constraints.

As stated in the Introduction, the definition of child labour in this study is drawn from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to which Afghanistan has been a signatory since 1994. The Convention calls upon State Parties to protect children from performing “any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.”³⁰ This definition is conditional, determined not only by the nature of children’s work *per se*, but according to the risk of harm to the child. In contrast to the Convention, the Afghanistan Labour Code attempts to protect children from hazardous work by adopting a minimum age approach akin to the ILO Minimum Age Convention. The Labour Code sets the minimum age for hazardous work at 18, but allows light, non-hazardous work for children above 15. It also mandates a 35-hour work week for children compared to 40 hours for adults.

Using the Labour Code as the benchmark, it becomes immediately apparent that none of the children identified in this study should be working, simply by virtue of being under the minimum working age of 15. All of the focal children have also had long work histories, some beginning work as young as age five. Furthermore, all five child labour cases are working extremely long hours, as much as twice the legally mandated work week for children.

Table 8 – Work history, daily routine and free time in Koche Nasaji

Child, age and work	Work history	Current daily routine	Leisure/free time
Sadiq age 14, apprentice in uncle’s mechanic shop	4 years in current activity	Works about 66 hours per week during school holidays and 33 hours per week during school year Works from 8:30am-7pm in winter; 7am-6pm in summer; 6 days/week during school holidays, but works part-time during school year; goes to bed at 10pm	On Fridays plays in nearby park with friends; watches television before going to bed
Ahsan age 13, street vendor	Four months in current activity; worked for one month cleaning and running errands at a property dealership	Works about 72 hours per week Works from 7am-7pm; 6 days/week; goes to bed at 9pm	On Fridays plays football with friends if has time

³⁰ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), Article 32.

Child, age and work	Work history	Current daily routine	Leisure/free time
Shahid age 13, apprentice in mechanic shop	Five years in current activity; worked for two years carpet weaving at home	Works about 78 hours per week Works from 7am-8pm, 6 days/week; attends religious classes at mosque after work; goes to bed at 9:30 pm	On Fridays plays sports with friends if has time
Kubra age 12, pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based)	Seven years in current activity	Works about 69 hours per week Works from 8am-10:30am; goes to course till 12 pm, from 1pm -11pm shells pistachios; does homework at 11pm; walks 30 min to the market twice a week to get more pistachios	Little to no leisure time
Shafiq age 14, carpet weaving (home-based)	Seven years in current activity; three months as live- in babysitter	Works about 48 hours per week Works from 7am-11am carpet weaving; does house chores from 11am-1pm; continues carpet weaving from 1pm- 5pm; cooks dinner then sometimes resumes carpet weaving until 10pm; goes to bed at 10-11pm	Watches television when free; occasionally visits relatives

Objective criteria such as age and work hours considered on their own are important but do not provide a complete picture of what puts children at risk of harm from their work or of which factors increase or mitigate such risk. It fails to acknowledge the positive functions that work can play in children's lives, which many of the respondents – including children themselves – describe as an important motivation for children's work. This section, therefore, will look at children's experience of work and the extent to which their work places them at risk of physical or psychosocial harm, or obstructs their right to education. It needs to be recognised that the extent to which work constitutes a risk to children's well-being depends on a range of factors. This section concludes by assessing which particular children are most at risk of harm from their work and why. It similarly assesses what kinds of work and in which situations children are most vulnerable.

5.1 Work conditions, risks and hazards

In all five child labour cases, children and adults describe hazards in the physical environment of the workplace as well as in the nature of the work itself which can jeopardise health and safety. Sadiq and Shahid, the two mechanic apprentices, are exposed to a variety of physical hazards in the workplace, including dangerous tools and machinery, falling objects, toxic substances, noise, and poor ventilation. Their exposure to such hazards over a long work history has resulted in numerous injuries, some with long-term effects:

I remember my first day at work when I was very small and my master told me to go and help another mechanic pull a thread which was made of metal. When I pulled it out I cut myself and started bleeding. I sat and started crying and then my master allowed me to go home. When I came home my mother bandaged my hand and I was off for a few days. [Showing a scar on his hand] Still you can see that I can't work properly with this thumb.

– Shahid

Once he came back home in the evening and his foot was wrapped in a piece of cloth. I made him stand up and I had a look at his foot. I found it had been cut very badly: he explained to me that he wanted to pick up a heavy iron thing in the shop, but it slipped from his hand and fell on his foot and cut it ... Another time, something fell on his shin and made a deep, round hole which almost looked like a big bullet hole. His hands always have sores, cuts and cracks.

– Sadiq's mother

Shafiqah and Kubra, the two female child labour cases, perform home-based work and experience different risks to their physical well-being. Carpet weaving requires Shafiqah to sit hunched over for up to 10 hours a day in a poorly lit room. Field notes made during interviews in this household describe the environment in which Shafiqah and her mother weave carpets together:

Two small windows let the light of sun inside and even though a light bulb was on, the rooms were dark, particularly the one where the interview took place. There was not enough light for writing so I wondered how the mother and the girl were carpet weaving in these conditions. The mother said: what can we do, we have to weave carpets under any circumstances.

– Field notes from interview with Shafiqah's mother

Kubra's different work activities entail specific hazards. She complains about the unpleasant odour from cleaning wool and covers her nose and mouth with a scarf so as not to inhale the small hairs. Pistachio shelling is even more irksome for Kubra, who describes regular backaches and headaches from her work, as well as consistent injuries to her hands. She has no protection for her fingers, nor does she take any medicine for the various painful effects of her work.

I: How do you shell the pistachios? Can you draw it for me?

R: [Drawing] This is a big stone. First we put three bricks on the ground and then we put the big stone on the bricks. Then everyone sits around the stone and we put the pistachios on the stone. We hold the pistachio between our fingers and we crack it open with a hammer.

I: Have you ever hit your finger with the hammer?

R: Yes, many times because the pistachio is small and I hold it between my fingers. I want to crack open the pistachio with the hammer but I hit my finger by mistake. When I do that, I put my hands under my armpits and wait for the pain to go away, and then I start shelling again ... We always sit hunched over and my back gets tired. Also, we break the pistachios with a hammer and my shoulder feels painful. Then I stretch my back and it feels better. Sometimes when the sack of pistachios is heavy and I carry it on my head, I get a headache and I can't understand anything.

– Kubra

Ahsan's work as a street vendor exposes him to traffic on the streets, as well as pollution, dust and harsh weather conditions. It is harassment from the police, however, that appears to cause him the most distress. Abuse and physical discipline in the workplace will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.2.

In spite of the many physical hazards of these children's work, there is little evidence of appropriate safety measures to reduce risk of harm. Neither Sadiq nor Shahid have protective clothing or equipment for their mechanic work; however, it is likely that their employers do not have access to such protection even for themselves:

I: Did Shahid ever hurt himself while working in the mechanic shop?

R: It happened several times that Shahid came back from work and his hands and eyes were burnt and weak. He complains about the pain in his eyes. They are red and he cries sometimes ... His father said to chop a potato and put it on his eyes to remove the pain, but we prefer to use drops. If it is not available then we use a potato.

I: When he does welding, does he not use special protective glasses?

R: No. He did tell me to buy him some glasses...

I: Does the master not have some that he could use?

R: He does not have any either.

— Shahid's mother

The lack of protective clothing and equipment, like the unlawfully long hours worked by the children, illustrate the unregulated character of many child labour situations. The children from these cases must contend with job insecurity, unpredictable income, lack of sick leave or holiday pay, and the absence of recourse to legal protection. Respondents reported several instances of employers who refused to pay children for their work, even after using their labour for a few months. When asked how they responded, the only recourse available to parents was to remove their children from the employment. It is important to note, however, that the exploitative conditions under which children work and the lack of protection available to them are often similar to the circumstances in which many adults make their living. This is particularly the case in Afghanistan's large informal sector where there are few regulatory mechanisms to protect the interests of workers.³¹ While all the children are exposed to work-related hazards, the extent to which they are forced to work for excessively long hours, without adequate time for rest and recreation, and beyond their strength, stamina and competence, depends in large part on the authority figures who govern their work and family lives.

5.2 Relationship with employers

Children's experience of work is strongly shaped by the people who have power and authority over them. In the case of Sadiq, working for a relative affords significant protection from ill-treatment or exploitation. Sadiq's uncle ensures that Sadiq can combine work and school, pays for his medical treatment, gives him leave days, and imparts skills and knowledge:

Not every master is willing to send his apprentice to school and do the work himself. But I'm not like one of them, I want the boys to be educated. It is true that sometimes there is more work and if Sadiq is not

³¹ The World Bank, "Afghanistan Poverty, Vulnerability and Social Protection: An Initial Assessment," <http://www.worldbank.org.af>, 7 March 2005 (accessed 17 July 2008).

there, it's difficult to do the work alone. But if I say that Sadiq should work and should not go to school then this is not good. I told you already that education is a priority over everything ... We are from his own family so we would work hard with them and could watch over them. If they worked somewhere else the masters would not teach them the skill as quickly. But as they are our own blood we didn't want them to work somewhere else.

– Sadiq's uncle

Sadiq himself describes a close and trusting relationship with his uncle. Although also his employer, Sadiq perceives him first and foremost as a caring and supportive father figure:

I: If you get sick during work time, will your maternal uncle let you go home?

R: Yes he is very good person, he doesn't care about work, he cares about our health all the time.

– Sadiq

The positive relationship between Sadiq and his uncle also influences the way in which Sadiq views the occasional physical discipline that he receives:

I: How is your relationship with your maternal uncle for whom you work?

R: Our relationship is very good. He has never beaten me up for any reason. Sometimes he beat me up but not seriously.

– Sadiq

Sadiq is able to rationalise his punishment as justified and reasonable within the context of a caring relationship with his employer, which may help to mitigate the risk of psychosocial distress.³² In contrast, Shahid's experience of physical punishment has had a much more significant impact on his psychosocial well-being, even leading him to consider leaving his apprenticeship.

I: How is your relationship with your master?

R: Our relationship is good.

I: Has he ever beaten you up?

R: Oh yes, he has beaten me many times.

[The respondent became very sad and looked like he wanted to cry. He put his head down so we moved onto another topic.]

– Shahid

Risks of negative psychosocial impact from physical abuse can also be amplified when children lack reliable support systems. Shahid's requests for help – denied by his mother – are likely to result in a sense of powerlessness and resignation which can have long-term effects on his psychosocial well-being and development:

I: You said you told your mother several times about the beating, what did she say when you told her?

R: She was saying nothing, just to forget it and it will be fine after some time.

– Shahid

³² Please see Smith, *Love, Fear and Discipline* for a more in-depth discussion of the use of physical discipline or punishment towards children in Afghanistan.

In Ahsan's case, street vending work exposes him and his brother to abuse by the police, who demand bribes from vendors in exchange for allowing them to sell their wares. Ahsan cannot afford to pay the bribe from his meagre earnings and is thus at constant risk of police harassment:

One day I was vending on the street. One policeman came and told me to move my wheelbarrow from the road and he was very angry. He was saying angry words but he did not say anything to the other vendors on the road, so I did not move my wheelbarrow because there were many customers who were coming from the other side of the road. After five minutes he came again with a big stick in his hand and he looked very angry. He hit my wheelbarrow very hard and broke it. I started to cry and my brother told me, no problem, let's go home. So we went home without any profit.

— Ahsan

When asked if he was aware of his sons' encounters with the police, Ahsan's father appeared either ignorant of or unwilling to admit instances of abuse:

I: Have the police ever beaten Ahsan or his brother while they were vending?

R: No, my sons were not beaten by the police.

Ahsan: The police did beat us.

[The respondent looked at his son and then he looked down.]

— Ahsan's father

The lack of adult supervision in the cases of Shahid and Ahsan put them at risk of physical harm, but it is the perceived or actual powerlessness of their parents to challenge the status quo that keeps them trapped in an abusive work environment. In the absence of responsible adults, children's peer relationships can serve as an important source of solidarity and support. Sadiq works alongside his two brothers, who help to watch out for one another in the hazardous environment of the mechanic shop. Ahsan also works on the street with his older brother, who although unable to prevent harassment by the police, is at least present to provide some measure of support. While peer relationships can help children cope with risks in the workplace, they cannot substitute for the protection and guidance of a responsible adult.

Both Shafiqah and Kubra perform home-based work, but their interviews reveal significant differences in their work circumstances and experiences. Shafiqah works alone with her mother, with whom she has an extremely close relationship. There is no evidence of coercion or ill-treatment: Shafiqah demonstrates a strong sense of agency and actively chooses to help her mother with carpet weaving. She is allowed to sleep in or take breaks whenever she feels tired, and is confident and secure enough in her relationship with her mother to ask for a share of their earnings. Kubra, by contrast, is berated by her mother for any tardiness in getting out of bed, and has never dared to ask for pocket money for herself. Her relationship with her mother does not exhibit the same degree of closeness as Shafiqah's, possibly due to the demands of the ten other children in the household. Interviewers also noted the personality and behavioural differences between the two girls: Shafiqah was confident and opinionated during her interview while Kubra constantly looked to her mother and grandmother for answers, and seemed cowed by their presence.³³ Personality traits no doubt account in part for children's resilience or vulnerability to risk. The nature of the relationship between the child and the employer — especially when the employer and the parent

³³ As noted in Section 2.4 on methodological challenges, the presence of Kubra's family members during her interview likely inhibited her responses. Interestingly, Shafiqah's interview was also conducted with her mother present, suggesting again the differences in the girls' personalities and family relationships.

are one and the same – can also play a large role in reducing or exacerbating the risk of physical and psychosocial harm.

5.3 Psychosocial effects of work

Various degrees and types of physical and psychosocial hazards often exist in combination in the workplace.³⁴ Unlike physical hazards, however, psychosocial hazards are not usually tangible or easily identified, and their effects are therefore difficult to assess. The abuse suffered by Shahid and Ahsan and the ineffectual response of their parents present the most obvious causes of psychosocial distress. It is likely, too, that there are other, more subtle psychosocial effects of work – both positive and negative.

Children's social integration and competence serves as one measure of psychosocial well-being.³⁵ Many children establish peer relationships and learn positive social and communication skills primarily in school. Out-of-school working children thus often lack opportunities to form peer relationships or learn positive interpersonal skills. Ahsan and Shahid have a very limited social network due to their long work hours, and both Sadiq's uncle and Shahid's mother have observed behavioural impacts of their work:

If they were in school they would be able to socialise more and be more polite in speaking, but as they are working with mechanics and talking with different types of customers, they think this is the world and this is the way to talk to people...Sadiq is a good boy, but he is not as good at being social.

– Sadiq's uncle

R: Shahid is young and very shy.

I: Has he always been shy like that?

R: No, it has become worse since he has started working at the mechanic's shop.

– Shahid's mother

Working children may also be at increased risk of psychosocial harm when the community norm is for children to attend school, as those who have to work may feel ashamed or humiliated.³⁶ The distress caused by being pulled out of school is evident in the observation of Ahsan's behaviour during an interview with his father regarding schooling:

This boy has asked me several times to send him to school. I tell him that there is no work for me and I am in debt, so what should I do? I cannot send him to school.

[Ahsan looked down and seemed about to cry.]

– Ahsan's father

For some children, however, the opportunity to contribute to their household survival may enhance their sense of confidence and pride. Even though Shahid works in hazardous conditions and has experienced abuse at the hands of his employer, he

³⁴ M. Woodhead, *Psychosocial impacts of child work: a framework for research, monitoring and intervention* (Rome: Understanding Children's Work Project, 2004).

³⁵ Woodhead, *Psychosocial impacts of child work*.

³⁶ This is in contrast with the Islam Qala site, where the norm is for children to work. Further discussion of the influence of peer groups and community norms in the Islam Qala site can be found in Part II.

credits his work with making him physically stronger and allowing him to support his family:

I: What is the benefit of this work, do you think?

R: I became stronger and I can now support my family.

I: Did you want to work at this place from the beginning?

R: Yes, I liked this job from beginning.

I: Why?

R: Whenever I saw boys working in such places, they had dirty and oily clothes which I liked as it showed that they work hard to support their family.

— Shahid

Interestingly, Shahid's mother also points out the physical benefits of Shahid's work, which, unlike the carpet weaving he used to do with the rest of the family at home, allows him to be outside and build up physical strength. Sadiq also expresses pride in the skills that he has obtained through his work, suggesting that the opportunity to learn and develop mental or physical capacities is central to how children feel about their work. Ahsan, by contrast, longs to return to school as "nothing can be learnt from work except remaining illiterate."

Shafiqa most clearly demonstrates that work, when perceived through specific lenses, can have psychosocial benefits. Shafiqa's ethnic and gender identity as a Turkmen girl is inextricably bound to carpet weaving, which she views less as work than as the bedrock of who she is and from which she derives a strong sense of pride and accomplishment:

I: How do you feel about carpet weaving?

R: I am happy with it. It's our work, we are Turkmen, we should learn carpet weaving. It is our business.

I: Did you ever get tired of carpet weaving or not feel like doing it anymore? You are weaving carpets from morning to night and all day you are sitting in one position...

R: No, I never feel like that. This is our business, our custom...carpet weaving is my passion, I never get tired of it.

— Shafiqa

Shafiqa's case demonstrates once again that children's experience of work is not uniform, but depends on a variety of contextual and child-specific factors. Because carpet weaving is a norm in Shafiqa's social sphere and is integral to her identity as a young Turkmen girl, she has a much more positive attitude towards her work compared to the children in the other cases.

5.4 Educational impact of work

Findings from this study largely support the conventional wisdom that child labour harms children's ability to stay in the school system and derive educational benefit from school attendance.³⁷ For children who work long hours, fatigue and the demands of their work result in chronic absenteeism, inability to concentrate in school and little time for homework. All three of the male child labour cases — Ahsan, Shahid and Sadiq

³⁷ L. Guarcello, S. Lyon and F.C. Rosati, *Child Labour and Education For All: An issue paper* (Rome: Understanding Children's Work Project, 2006).

– as well as their siblings, report negative effects of work on their school attendance and performance:

Last year Hamid was absent from school five times. When I heard about this, I beat Hamid and asked him why he had missed school? He told me that he had too much work.

– Sadiq's mother

I: So what are the disadvantages of your work?

R: I left my school. That was the biggest difficulty for me.

I: How were you with your studies?

R: I was not good, my teacher was always beating me.

I: Why were you not so good?

R: Because I never did my homework. And I couldn't study.

I: Why?

R: Because I was working until late at night, how could I find time to study?

– Shahid

Shahid's case illustrates the close link between school achievement and school attendance, whereby poor performance in school often contributes to the decision to leave school altogether. This is particularly true when teachers do not accommodate the special needs of working children, and instead penalise them when their school attendance or performance suffer as a result of work demands. Furthermore, the shame of being in a class with younger children can result in a loss of interest in academic pursuits:

I sent Shahid to the mosque for him to learn to pray properly. There are also other children there who are younger than Shahid and know the Holy Koran well. He is older and shy about not knowing. If they get an answer wrong they will be told to stand on one leg in front of all the others...At first it was because of work that he could not go...he does not have time to do his homework. He asks us why we did not send him when he was small, because now he is shy about giving the wrong answer.

– Shahid's mother

The demands of work can contribute to children's inability to derive full educational benefit, even when they are allowed to combine school with work. Flexibility and sensitivity of employers and teachers are thus crucial to ensuring that the special needs of working children are met.

5.5 Risk reduction strategies

For the most part, respondents demonstrate keen awareness of the various risks and hazards experienced by their children at work, and attempt to mitigate those risks through a number of strategies. The most common strategy involves careful selection of the child's employer, who should ideally be a relative or, at the very least, a trusted member of the community. Sadiq's mother explicitly states that she feels less worried for her sons' physical and moral well-being because they work with their uncles, who ensure they are safe and protected from negative influences:

I: Did you send your sons to work in those shops just because their maternal uncles were the masters?

R: Yes, they were small and couldn't understand everything well and they had no father. I thought that they would be safer if they were in the hands

of their maternal uncles than in other people's hands. If they came back late, I would not worry about it, because I knew that they were with their uncles.

I: Would you want to change their jobs and send them to some other workshop for higher pay?

R: No. In other workshops there will be many apprentices who have different kinds of behaviour. I have placed my children with their uncles so they won't be with others. My brothers would not accept just any kind of apprentice.

— Sadiq's mother

Sadiq's mother, who is extremely committed to her sons' continued education, also knows that her brothers would be flexible with work schedules in order to allow her sons to stay in school. Other employers who are not relatives — and so may not have as much commitment to the child's well-being — would likely show less willingness to make such allowances. Shahid's employer, for instance, who is unrelated to Shahid, forced him to choose between work and school.

Parents also attempt to reduce risk by choosing appropriate work locations and activities. Several respondents referred to the distance between the workplace and home as a deciding factor in where children should work, particularly if they are young. Parents' fears of kidnapping and the general insecurity in Herat city contribute to the desire to keep children close to home and with trusted adults at the workplace. In other examples of oversight, parents may check on children at their workplace if they are late, and intervene or mediate with employers or other authority figures in the event of physical punishment. Shahid's father, for instance, upon learning that the mechanic master was beating his son, went to ask him to refrain from doing so for some time until his son was older and more familiar with the work. Note, however, that the objection was not to physical discipline *per se*, but rather to punishing Shahid while he was still young and inexperienced. This implies that the employer could justifiably mete out physical punishment once Shahid crossed a certain age and experience threshold.

Concern about risk reduction can also drive work type decisions. Ahsan's mother, for instance, prefers that her older son work as a mechanic's apprentice while her younger son does vending work:

If Ahsan works as an apprentice in a shop, he would have to obey the orders of someone else, the master or the elder apprentice for example, and if he doesn't do it well or correctly he might be scolded or even beaten. So I think it would be better for his older brother to work as an apprentice because he is older and wiser and can carry out the orders better, and might tolerate the situation better if the master scolds him, compared to Ahsan who is smaller. In that case it is better if Ahsan works in our own business like vending, because if he makes a mistake or damages something, it would belong to us and no one else punishes him for that.

— Ahsan's mother

While his parents rationalise the decision for Ahsan to be a street vendor by referring to the fewer risks involved in self-employment, they overlook the considerable hazards involved in street work. Parental ignorance regarding the risks of their children's work may also stem from a sense of denial, which helps parents cope with their fears and worries. Sadiq's mother, for example, deliberately chooses not to visit her sons' workplace as she would be even more consumed with fears for their safety:

I never went to see where they worked. I prefer not to see what kind of material they work with or carry or handle...I am not entirely comfortable with their work, but I think if I were to see where they work, I would worry even more.

— Sadiq's mother

All of the adult respondents in our cases demonstrate enormous concern for their children's safety and well-being, and attempt to reduce their exposure to harm. In many cases, however, parents are limited in their power to protect, particularly when authority figures like the police perpetrate the abuse or when economic survival compels them to accept undesirable working terms and conditions. The difficulties in labour regulation, while applicable to all of Afghanistan, are particularly acute for the many children who work in informal, small-scale, illegal or family-based settings which are hidden from public view.

The complexity of the five cases of child labour in this study demonstrates that no simple correlation exists among child work, presence of hazards, risk of harm and actual impact. Instead, the exposure of a particular child to work-related hazards, and the effects on the child's physical and psychosocial well-being, depend on a variety of interacting factors such as the child's personality, employer, peer group and family life. Table 9 summarises the various hazards as well as corresponding risk and protective factors in each child labour case and assesses relative vulnerability of each child to severe or long-term harm.³⁸

³⁸ In this table, "hazards" are defined as activities, conditions and other factors that may jeopardise safety or well-being; "risk factors" are characteristics that may increase the likelihood of being affected or harmed by the hazard; and "protective factors" refer to the assets or resources that may increase resilience and reduce actual harm. "Vulnerability," therefore, is the degree to which one is at risk of harm based on the interaction of hazards, and risk and protective factors.

Table 9 – Risk and vulnerability analysis for Koche Nasaji

Child, age and work	Hazards	Risk factors	Protective factors
Sadiq age 14, apprentice in uncle's mechanic shop	Use of dangerous tools and machinery; exposure to high temperatures; falling objects; lifting of heavy loads; noisy and polluted work environment; physical punishment; competing work/school demands leading to potential premature dropout	No protective clothing and equipment; lack of physical strength; long work hours; long work history	Presence of adult supervision and peer support from siblings; positive relationship with employer, also seen as caring father figure; flexible employer willing to accommodate school; opportunities for rest and play; some access to earnings
Ahsan age 13, street vendor	Police harassment and abuse; exposure to traffic and pollution; undependability of work and income; non-resumption of school	No recourse to protection; lack of power due to young age; no adult supervision; parental prioritisation of economic demands over education; minimal social network; little opportunity for recreation and play	Peer support from sibling; occasional adult supervision, particularly after dark
Shahid age 13, apprentice in mechanic shop	Use of dangerous tools and machinery; exposure to high temperatures; falling objects; lifting of heavy loads; noisy and polluted work environment; physical punishment; non-resumption of school	No protective clothing and equipment; long work hours; lack of adult supervision and peer support; abusive and inflexible employer unwilling to accommodate school; pressure of financial responsibility; long work history; minimal social network; little opportunity for recreation and play	Sense of pride and accomplishment from learning skills and gaining physical strength
Kubra age 12, pistachio shelling, wool cleaning, seed sorting (home-based)	Forced adoption of poor posture; dimly-lit and crowded work environment; injuries to hands, inhalation of wool fibres and dirt, eye and nose irritation; lack of access to educational opportunities	No protective equipment; no medical treatment for physical effects of work; long work hours; coercive behaviour of family members; little time for rest and play; long work history; discriminatory gender attitudes of family members; no access to earnings	Social interaction from group and family-based work
Shafiq age 14, carpet weaving (home-based)	Forced adoption of poor posture; dimly-lit work environment; inhalation of wool fibres and dirt	Long work hours; long work history	Positive and caring relationship with employer (mother); passion and interest in carpet weaving leading to sense of pride and accomplishment; carpet weaving as expected activity due to ethnic and gender norms; possibility of rest when required; some access to earnings

As the information in Table 9 illustrates, analysing risk and vulnerability in child labour cases is far from straightforward, as the degree to which children are exposed to harm depends on a variety of dynamic and interrelating factors. The impact of work also depends on work history and intensity: children who have been exposed to work-related hazards for a longer period of time will more likely exhibit cumulative physical or psychosocial effects in later childhood or adulthood.³⁹ Based on the above analysis, out of the five cases of child labour, Ahsan, Shahid and Kubra seem to be at the greatest risk of severe and long-term harm to their physical and psychosocial well-being. Unlike Sadiq and Shafiq who exhibit more evidence of protective factors, Ahsan, Shahid and Kubra must not only contend with numerous work-related hazards, but are also made more vulnerable by the greater presence of risk than protective factors. This analysis demonstrates that assessments of the potential harm of child labour cannot focus only on the nature and conditions of work, but must also include the risk and protective factors entailed in each child's work and family lives.

³⁹ Woodhead, *Psychosocial impacts of child work*.

6. Aspirations for the Future

All the children in the child labour cases express a deep desire to return to and remain in school, but recognise that this decision depends on their parents and significant improvements in their household livelihoods. Of the children interviewed, only Shafiqa expresses no desire to resume her education and appears entirely content with carpet weaving. She is the only child who does not wish for a different occupation in the future: her sole ambition is to become an expert carpet weaver and craftswoman. As noted earlier, her contentment is likely due to her ethnic and gender identity, and the prevailing norms of the Turkmen community in which she lives. For Shafiqa, carpet weaving is a respected and desired profession, and she feels no need to aspire to anything different.

The other children and parents in the child labour and non-child labour cases all harbour ambitious dreams of becoming doctors, teachers or engineers. Central to these career aspirations is the desire for the child to “become somebody”: this suggests that obtaining respect and status in the community is as strong an incentive for professional employment as a high and regular income. The following exchange with Sadiq, who has worked as a mechanic’s apprentice for the last four years, illustrates this deep desire for respect, which he sees as achievable only through education and professional employment:

I: *What would you like to be in the future?*

R: *Doctor, engineer or a teacher of science at school.*

I: *What are the benefits of being a doctor?*

R: *The benefits will be for poor people, to help them day and night.*

I: *Don’t you think that the work you do currently serves a purpose?*

R: *Yes, it does, but not as much as a doctor. People do not have as much respect for mechanics as they have for a doctor.*

R: *What do you mean by respect?*

I: *People respect doctors more than they do mechanics. This is because a doctor is always considered to be educated and a mechanic is always considered illiterate. That is why people do not have as much respect for mechanics.*

— Sadiq

Other reasons for aspiring to certain careers include job security and independence. Although Saleem’s mother recognises that government jobs do not pay well, she hopes for him to become a government employee: regular and stable employment is a greater priority for her than salary. Conversely, Rukhshana’s father values independence in a profession, and therefore desires his son to become a skilled, self-employed architect in the future.

While almost all the respondents report ambitious professional goals for their children, they know that many obstacles — namely poverty and lack of education — stand in the way of fulfilling those dreams. Several respondents from child labour households, such as Kubra’s mother and Ahsan’s mother, express a sense of resignation regarding their children’s futures and appear to have given up on the possibility of a better life:

Even though they will not become teachers or something like that, they can at least say their prayers properly.

— Kubra’s mother

R: It is good to read. All people who are literate earn money through their pens. They lead a comfortable life. But that will not happen for us.

I: Why is that not going to happen?

R: What do you want me to do? Our life expenditures are too high and we do not sell any carpets. There is not any job for my husband to find.

– Ahsan's mother

Even Sadiq's mother, who during the bulk of her interviews expressed deep determination to ensure a "bright future" for her children through any means possible, acknowledges in a rare moment of despair the impact of work on their future prospects:

I think they will not be able to become teachers in the future. For being a teacher children have to start going to school when they are six years old and continue their education beyond 12th grade. But my children went to the mechanic shop when they were seven years old and most of their time has been spent in the mechanic shop not in school, and I think even if they finish 12th grade and graduate they would not become teachers or a government employee, because they have spent most of their lives in the mechanic shop. It looks like they are the pupils of the mechanic shop not school. My eldest son is 15 years old and only in 5th grade, because he did not spend his energy and time just on schooling. From the beginning they went to school as well as work.

– Sadiq's mother

As mentioned in Section 4.4, certain respondents view ethnicity (for example, being Turkmen) and gender as barriers to professional success. The parents of both Shafiqa and Kubra demonstrate a striking lack of planning regarding their daughters' future, in part because they acknowledge that once married their daughters will "belong" to other families and thus be outside their purview:

I: What about the future? How long would you like to continue weaving carpets?

Shafiqa: I never think about the future. I don't know.

Shafiqa's mother: [laughing] We have never discussed such things.

– Shafiqa

I: What will Kubra be doing in one year's time?

R: After shelling pistachios she will clean kurk. Then she will clean seeds and if there are no seeds, then she will learn embroidery.

– Kubra's grandfather

By contrast, Rukhshana's father aspires for his daughter to become a doctor, as Afghanistan lacks female doctors. Unlike other parents, whose ambitions seem disconnected from the desires of the children themselves, Rukhshana's father emphasises the importance of letting his daughter make her own choices:

She is also interested in being a doctor. It is not me telling her or pressuring her to be a doctor...it depends on the person's interest. If you put pressure on a person, then he or she will never do what you

want. But if you let the person do what they want, then they will become something.

– Rukhshana's father

As described in Section 4.6, greater consideration of the child's interest and desires appears to characterise the non-child labour households, and in the case of Rukhshana's father relates not only to current decisions but also to future plans. Rukhshana's father demonstrates unusual liberalism regarding his daughter's marriage, valuing education, honesty and kindness over ethnicity, and refusing to ask for bride price. However, he goes on to state that after marriage, his daughter will be under the authority of her husband, who will decide whether or not to let her work. Similarly, most parents of boys express the desire to have literate daughters-in-law in spite of the fact that their own daughters may be illiterate. Such contradictions around the role and autonomy of girls indicate gradual shifts in gender norms, which continue to arouse conflicting feelings among individuals and households.⁴⁰

To conclude, children and parents alike report high aspirations for the future, but recognise that such goals are unlikely to be achieved without proper investments in education. Respondents demonstrate keen awareness of contextual factors that may inhibit the future well-being of their children and families: first and foremost national (in)security and economy, but also ethnicity and its implications for equal access and opportunity. The issue of child labour, therefore, cannot be tackled in isolation, but must involve a multi-faceted approach that incorporates short and long-term, as well as local and national-level, interventions in order to achieve positive, sustainable outcomes for the future of children and their families.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Love, Fear and Discipline*.

PART II: The Islam Qala Border

7. Research Setting

7.1 History and background

The village of Dashte Khushk⁴¹ was first settled by inhabitants of Kohsan district some 120 years ago. The turbulent events of Afghanistan's recent history have had a significant impact on the lives and livelihoods of the villagers. During the Russian war, aerial raids conducted by the Soviets resulted in considerable human and livestock casualties, and destroyed property and crops. The village practically emptied during this time as those who had not perished during the war fled the landmines and bombs by crossing the border into Iran. Upon the fall of the Communist regime and the brief presidency of Sibghatullah Mojaddi, the majority of villagers returned from exile along with a substantial number of Kuchi nomads who, upon return from Iran, settled in Dashte Kushk. This period was short-lived, however, as many villagers again fled to Iran and other provinces within Afghanistan during the civil war and Taliban regime due to intense fighting, drought and impoverishment.

Due to the current push to repatriate Afghan refugees from Iran, substantial numbers of people are either returning voluntarily or being deported back to Afghanistan. The influx of returnees is a strain on Dashte Kushk and the other villages surrounding the Afghan-Iranian border, as existing livelihoods and infrastructure lack the capacity to absorb the extra demand for jobs and resources. In spite of efforts by the Iranian government to halt the flow of illegal migrants from Afghanistan, many continue to cross into Iran – often through smugglers – in pursuit of more stable and profitable employment.⁴²

There are approximately 700 households living in Dashte Khushk. The ethnically diverse population includes Tajiks, Pashtuns, Turkmens and Baluch, with the majority being Sunni Tajik. A small tribe known as Tahiri, mostly consisting of settled Kuchi, lives in the south-eastern part of the village. The Tahiri constitute approximately 340 households and are geographically and socially distinct from the rest of Dashte Kushk. Separated by a small canal running through the village, the Tahiri have their own local leadership and school, and have very little interaction with the rest of Dashte Kushk, reportedly due to a feud.

Dashte Khushk is located 110 kilometres (one and a half hours by car) from Herat city and approximately seven kilometres from the border. There are very few facilities within the village itself and residents must travel 15 to 20 minutes on foot to a neighbouring town in order to access healthcare, the bazaar, secondary school and public transportation to Herat city or the border. Besides the primary school, which only goes up to 7th grade, there are three mosques in the village that are housed in mud buildings. Box 5 provides a summary of the basic facilities available to residents.

⁴¹ All research sites and respondents have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

⁴² Please see Section 7.4.4 for more information on labour migration to Iran.

*Box 5 – Basic facilities in Dashte Khushk***Electricity**

Electricity was installed in the village three years ago by an Iranian company and each household that wished to be connected to the power grid had to pay 15,000 Afs at the time. Now, however, households must pay 25,000 Afs to the Afghan government in order to connect electricity to their homes. All four case households had electricity installed in their homes when it first became available three years ago.

Water

Most households access water from private wells or public water pumps. All four case households have private wells in their compounds which they use for drinking water and other household needs.

Health

There are no healthcare facilities in the village itself, so villagers must travel to a neighbouring town to visit the private health clinic and pharmacy. The clinic, however, is unable to treat serious conditions, so severely ill patients must travel to Herat city in order to access more qualified care. In January 2008, an international NGO conducted a three-month training course on reproductive health and pre-natal care for 10 women and equipped them with first-aid kits, with the intention that the women would then train others in the village.

Transportation

Individuals wishing to travel from Dashte Kushk to Herat city must first go on foot to the neighbouring town 15 to 20 minutes away, where they can catch various forms of public transportation to the city. A minibus is the cheapest option at 100 Afs per person, a shared Corolla taxi costs 200 Afs per person, and a private taxi costs 2,000 Afs for the 1.5-hour, one-way journey.

Finally, respondents reported prior activities by several NGOs but were unable to remember the names of the organisations. NGO activity reportedly involved the construction of water wells and pumps following the fall of the Taliban, as well as more recently, the establishment of an income generation project involving carpet weaving. In response to a rapid assessment of child labour at the border conducted in 2006 by UNAMA and various NGOs,⁴³ an international NGO created community working groups within the relevant villages (including Dashte Kushk) with the aim of building community awareness and capacity around child protection needs. Interventions included a three-month training course on pre-natal care and child development, as well as provision of a slide for the neighbourhood school.

7.2 Local governance and leadership structures

There are two main governance structures in Dashte Kushk: one, the traditional village council, is responsible for informal dispute resolution; and two, the more recently established Community Development Council (CDC) formed under the National Solidarity Programme (NSP). Both *shuras* are led by the *arbab* of the village, who is assisted by three assistant *arbabs* representing clusters of households.⁴⁴ The Tahiri have a parallel, completely separate governance system including a CDC and a traditional *shura* led by the Tahiri *arbab*. The leadership of

⁴³ DoLSA, AIHRC, UNAMA, UNICEF, Help and IRC, "Joint Assessment on Child Labour at Islam Qala Border Point," October 2006.

⁴⁴ Due to the size of the population, there are plans to create another CDC; however, this had not yet been established at the time of fieldwork.

the two communities do not overlap or coordinate. In addition, there is a separate CDC for women in the village, as well as an umbrella *shura* with 170 female members representing women from 43 villages, which was established by the Department of Women's Affairs.

The *arbab* and *shuras* in Dashte Khushk appear to have considerable power and influence over the village, and act as strict gatekeepers for any outsider wishing to interact with the residents. Requests to speak with a particular household, especially among the Tahiri community, had to be approved first by the leadership and then by the male head of household before the research team could enter the house. The strict adherence to hierarchy observed through the course of fieldwork suggests that the residents of Dashte Khushk have limited autonomy or space to negotiate alternatives to the norm, which in turn has implications for household decisions around the use of child labour.⁴⁵

7.3 Educational options

The primary school in Dashte Khushk, comprising grades one through seven, was established six years ago. Before this, there were no educational facilities in the village itself. According to the school's principal and teachers, 600 female students attend the morning shift and 400 male students attend in the afternoon. There are five female and ten male teachers, none of whom have beyond a seventh grade education. Although on the Department of Education payroll, none are certified as professional teachers. Until 2006, the World Food Programme (WFP) had been funding a school feeding programme to encourage female student enrolment; there are no plans for the programme to resume.

All respondents expressed grave concerns regarding the poor quality of instruction at the school, as well as the appalling physical condition of the school building. The school, located on the outskirts of the village, is on loan by the owner of the building, who may decide to reclaim his property at any time. The building was originally used as a stable and hence, classes are held in small, mud rooms where a small window and the door provide the only sources of light. During one visit to the school, the research team observed more than 30 students crowded into each of these rooms, with barely enough chairs and desks, and no textbooks or writing materials. The courtyard was littered with refuse and pools of dirty, stagnant water, with only one latrine each for girls and boys. The poor quality of the school is consistently cited as one of the main reasons for children dropping out and going to work at the border. Enrolment and retention of girls are also suffering due to the widespread belief that the school building is inhabited by *jin* (spirits). These *jin* are reported to manifest themselves only to female teachers and students, which has resulted in some parents pulling their daughters out of school.

In addition to the school in Dashte Khushk, the Tahiri community has its own much smaller school with only first and second grade, 60 female and 60 male students, and one female and one male teacher. Only the female teacher is on the Department of Education payroll, while the salary of the male teacher is contributed by the families of students; both teachers are paid the same amount. The Tahiri CDC has submitted a proposal to construct a proper school in the community, but the villagers have not been able to meet the condition that they themselves pool the funds for the school land.

⁴⁵ Please see Section 8.6.

The only option in the vicinity for schooling beyond seventh grade is in a neighbouring town 15 to 20 minutes away on foot, which male students can attend up to 12th grade. Teachers in Dashte Khushk report that very few children from the village have gone on to continue their education either in this neighbouring town or other districts, and most children stop school at seventh grade if not much before. Parents may be discouraged by the burdensome process of enrolling children in another school, as this requires travelling to the district centre in Kohsan to obtain documents authorising the transfer. Many respondents also report that the school in the neighbouring town is at full capacity and will not accept any more students.

In response to the findings of the 2006 rapid assessment of child labour at the border, an INGO established a vocational training centre in the town neighbouring Dashte Khushk which provides courses in literacy, English language, tailoring, mechanics and computers. Approximately 75 percent of the children at the centre also work, although it is likely that the students in the English and computer classes are only attending school. Among the children who work, many were first identified and registered at the NGO's "welcome centre" at the border (see NGO office on map), and then enrolled in the vocational training centre. Drop-in classes occur daily at the welcome centre for children working at the border; subjects include literacy and health education. The NGO also employs social workers who provide outreach to children's families in order to encourage them to take their children out of work, or at least to allow them to obtain skills training at the centre. None of the respondents, however, have attended or even heard of either the welcome centre at the border or the vocational training centre in the neighbouring town.

7.4 Livelihood activities

Livelihood opportunities in Dashte Khushk are scarce and mainly consist of border-related activities, casual wage labour, labour migration to Iran, and agriculture. Unemployment is rife, as the wave of returnees and deportees from Iran has put increased pressure on an already saturated job market, resulting in high competition for work. Most villagers must therefore combine border-related activities with casual wage labour or farming in order to afford basic needs. The following sub-sections describe each of these forms of economic activity in detail.

Work activities at the Afghan-Iranian border

The majority of the residents of Dashte Khushk and the other villagers in the vicinity derive their livelihoods from the border, which is commonly referred to as *gomrok* or customs area. Work activities at the border can be classified into two categories: one, manual labour that is performed in groups organised by and registered with the customs office; and two, informal, self-employment activities such as mobile vending and portering. Local leadership of Dashte Khushk estimates that approximately 8,000 individuals of all ages work at the border each day, of which only 2,000 are registered.

Registered workers hold an identity card issued by the customs office and belong to a “union” which organises the workers into groups. In addition to the cleaning and maintenance workers who are registered with the union, there are 60 groups of ten wage labourers, each of whose primary work activities include portering (see Porter Waiting Area on map) and loading/unloading trucks. Each group works according to a staggered schedule of one week on and two weeks off, which began in order to manage the huge demand for work at the border.

In addition to the head of the union, who is reported to be a wealthy and influential mullah, each group has a leader who takes daily attendance of the workers, allocates tasks and collects all earnings at the end of the day. Earnings are evenly distributed among all the workers on duty that day, regardless of the amount of work performed by each individual or group, and average earnings per person per day generally fall between 70 and 150 Afs. Registered workers undertake a variety of tasks, including loading and unloading trucks, portering, and maintaining the premises of the customs area. There are both boys and men in these registered work groups, but typically older boys above the age of 14 are preferred due to the arduous nature of the work.

Non-registered workers, on the other hand, are self-employed and not officially recognised by the customs office, so they are subject to harassment by the border police and must often spend a part of their daily earnings on bribes to continue working at the border. Work activities include mobile vending, portering, money exchanging, truck guarding and fuel-related work (explained below). Many of these workers are also members of the registered groups that go to seek work at the border during the two weeks that they are officially “off” in an effort to supplement their income.

According to an international NGO that has registered children working at the border since 2006, there are currently 542 children engaged in a variety of work activities such as loading and unloading trucks, portering, truck guarding, cart pulling, mobile vending, street sweeping, fuel-related work, and begging. Some children are accompanied by older male family members who also work at the border, while others work alone or are orphans. The majority of children commute each day from their villages to the border, but a small group occasionally spends the night at the border in small, wooden shacks near the bazaar (see Makeshift Shelters on map). As noted by staff from the INGO, the border is a hotbed of illicit activities such as thievery and drug trafficking and use, and children are at great risk of exploitation and abuse, particularly through recruitment into organised crime and gang activity.

Fuel-related work

Fuel-related work commonly occurs at the border (see Truck Parking Area on map). Referred to as *tel zadan* or *tel kashidan*, this generic term literally means fuel stealing

or fuel extraction, and can refer to a range of activities related to fuel, including transferring fuel or stealing fuel from the fuel tanks of trucks. As fuel is cheaper in Iran than in Afghanistan, Iranian truck drivers make some extra cash by bringing in an extra tank of fuel to sell across the border. In order to avoid being taxed at the customs office, however, the truck drivers distribute the fuel among the waiting boys and men, who transport the fuel in plastic containers outside the border area, where they then return the fuel to the truck driver. Each fuel carrier is paid 10 or 20 Afs per run. Stealing fuel from trucks to sell in the bazaar is also a common activity, and typically occurs at night while the trucks are parked at customs. Some people also buy fuel from truck drivers in order to sell it at a higher price in the bazaar. Children do not usually have as much cash to buy fuel individually, however, so often gather in groups of four or five to pool their money and purchase a gallon of fuel for 370 Afs. They then sell the fuel at 380 Afs per gallon in the bazaar, and can earn approximately 50 Afs per person per day at the end of a day's worth of transactions.

All fuel-related work activities are considered illicit since they are, in essence, a means of avoiding tax. Bribery of the police is routine and necessary, and each person – whether child or adult – must pay 5 to 10 Afs a day in order to be allowed to continue their activities. Police harassment and abuse of those who have not paid the required bribes is commonly reported.

Drug trafficking

Due to the proximity of the border with Iran, drug trafficking appears to be a common and lucrative activity among the residents of villages in the vicinity. According to key informants, drug trafficking was ubiquitous in Dashte Khushk during the Taliban period and, although now somewhat reduced, still offers a source of income for a number of households. According to one respondent, who was himself a drug trafficker during the Taliban regime, groups of five or six people would transport raw opium, heroin or crystal from Kandahar, Uruzgan or Helmand across the border to Iran, where they would receive 2-3 million *toman* in total. This form of illicit work is naturally extremely dangerous, and drug traffickers run the risk of being arrested or even shot by the Iranian authorities.

It is not known how many individuals in Dashte Khushk are involved in drug trafficking, but the striking atmosphere of fear and suspicion – particularly around strangers – is likely due to the prevalence of this illicit activity.⁴⁶ The lack of alternative income generation opportunities motivates individuals to continue this extremely lucrative activity, in spite of the immense risks involved. As one former drug trafficker states: "If a person has no other alternative, he is capable of anything." This non-child labour household respondent, although with the highest education level in our sample (eighth grade) and an expert mason, has not been able to find permanent employment and is considering a return to drug trafficking in order to keep his children out of work and in school. The risks that this and other villagers take in order to survive illustrate the scarcity of licit and adequately-remunerated work activities in Dashte Khushk and the surrounding border areas. The mix of activities at the border – licit and illicit, low-paid and lucrative – and the resulting atmosphere of profiteering on the one hand and economic desperation on the other are described below by an NGO staff member based at the border:

Here at the border there are wealthy businessmen making sure that their trucks full of drugs cross the border without problems, but also hopeless

⁴⁶ Please see Section 2.4 on methodological challenges.

people with no other choice but to beg for their daily income. So, the border is not just a place of misery, but much more a place where people do the most to maximize their profit!

Casual wage labour and migration to Iran

Many male villagers attempt to supplement income from farming or border-related work with casual wage labour in Dashte Kushk and the surrounding villages. Wage labour opportunities, however, are scarce and highly competitive, with most villagers – even skilled labourers – able to find work only twice a month at the most. Common wage labour activities include construction, seasonal farming activities, canal digging and road graveling. The daily wage varies from 70 to 200 Afs depending on the type of work and whether it is a child or adult. Wages can also be paid in kind (e.g. wheat, rice, construction materials).

Labour migration to Iran is another widespread livelihood strategy. Lured by the prospect of greater and more highly paid work in Iran, many households send at least one male member across the border and remittances form an integral part of many households' livelihood portfolios. The risks are high, however: most people have neither passport nor visa and must contract a smuggler to transport them across the border. The journey is not only expensive at 400,000 *toman* per person, but also extremely dangerous. During the course of fieldwork, a group of 70 boys and men from Dashte Khushk attempted to be smuggled into Iran but the Iranian authorities reportedly caught them. The mood in the village was tense as family members awaited news of their sons or husbands, with frequent rumours of arrests and shootings. According to respondents, one risks arrest and deportation even after crossing the Iranian border due to the crackdown on illegal Afghan migrants by the Iranian government. Several respondents mentioned that their male family members in Iran have not been able to look for work due to fears of raids by the police. Although there is greater possibility of well-paid work in Iran, earnings for as long as six months are often diverted to paying off the smuggling debt, as most people cannot afford payment upfront. Hence, households in Dashte Khushk may begin enjoying remittances from Iran only half a year after the departure of their male family member.

Agriculture and livestock

Approximately half of the village population engages in farming either their own land or – as sharecroppers – land owned by others. Sharecroppers typically receive one out of three parts of the harvest yield, and all agricultural inputs are the responsibility of the landowner. Most of the land in the village is rain-fed. Cultivated crops include black cumin, wheat and watermelon. These crops, particularly black cumin which is the most profitable cash crop in the area, require extensive watering and agricultural yields have been greatly affected by the reported drought of the last six years. As a result of the drought, many households have sold their land and explored other livelihood activities such as border-related work, daily wage labour, and migration to Iran.

The long drought has also affected livestock holdings in the village. Most households own at least two and as many as 15 sheep and goats, which they either graze themselves or send with a shepherd to the mountains. A shortage in livestock fodder in recent years due to the drought has depleted livestock numbers and reduced milk production. Respondents report that they can no longer rely on milk from their livestock either for household consumption or for sale of milk products such as

yoghurt, cheese and butter, and may resort to distress sales of their livestock if the drought continues.

Women's work

Women in Dashte Khushk have very limited opportunities for paid work either inside or outside the home. Most women are engaged in household chores, although some perform home-based work such as tailoring or sewing quilts and cushions, and occasionally assist their husbands and sons with seasonal farming activities. While the research team observed some elderly women engaging in fuel-related work at the border – generally begging for fuel or stealing fuel from trucks during the night – girls and women of child-bearing age rarely work at the border.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ During one visit to the border, the research team observed a five-year-old girl begging with her father. It is likely that any girls working at the border are accompanied by a male family member, although even this is quite uncommon.

8. Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour

This section discusses the key findings from the household interviews in Dashte Kushk, beginning with a brief overview of the four household cases, followed by an analysis of the factors that influence decisions to use or not use child labour. These factors are grouped into five main categories: limited livelihood options and economic insecurity; household composition and gender norms; work and school tradeoffs; influence of community norms and role models; and, resignation and powerlessness. The section then examines the non-child labour household of Bilal to draw out key characteristics that may account for the different ways in which it considers the use of child labour in response to livelihood insecurity.

8.1 Key characteristics of cases

Table 10 contains basic information about the four household cases in Dashte Kushk. All four child labour cases involve boys working at the border who have dropped out of school in the last one to two years. In the non-child labour household, all the children (apart from a 7-year-old boy who will enrol in school next year) attend school full-time.

Table 10 – Key characteristics of cases in Dashte Kushk

Child, sex and age	Ethnicity	Work activities (full/part-time)	Educational history
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS			
Shakib male, age 13	Tajik	Sells mobile phone cards at border (full-time)	Dropped out of school last year at 5th grade
Fawad male, age 13	Tajik	Loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border (full-time)	Dropped out of school two years ago at 6th grade
Soliman male, age 13	Tajik	Loads trucks (unregistered), sells fuel at border (full-time)	Dropped out of school two and a half years ago at 5th grade
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS			
Bilal male, age 16	Tajik	None	Enrolled in 7th grade in school in neighbouring town

8.2 Limited livelihood options and economic insecurity

The extreme poverty faced by all the child labour households is a primary motivation for the decision to send their children to work. The Afghan-Iranian border dominates the livelihoods context in Dashte Khushk in providing the main source of income-generating activities for the majority of adults and children in the surrounding villages. All of the male respondents rely on border work for their survival, with the exception of Reza's father, who looks for wage labouring opportunities in Dashte Kushk and the surrounding area (see Table 11). Like many of the men in Dashte Khushk, the male adults in the child labour households work at the border in organised groups that are registered with the customs office. Due to the high competition for employment,

however, the groups are organised to work in turns - i.e. on for one week and off for the following two weeks. Furthermore, as the earnings depend on the level of activity at the border and are divided equally among all the group members working that week, the income from the one or two weeks a month when work is guaranteed is variable and often quite low. Chronically poor households must struggle to afford basic necessities, particularly given the few employment opportunities outside group work at the border:

I: What other kinds of work could your husband do besides loading and unloading trucks at the border?

R: Nothing. There are no other possibilities. No harvesting, no farming, nothing.

— Shakib's mother

I: What do you do during the two weeks that you don't have any work to do?

R: I don't do any kind of work, there is no work to do.

I: How much money do you make a day from working in the group?

R: It is not a specific wage, but I get around 50-100 Afs per day.

I: What do you do with the money?

R: I buy bread, tea, cooking oil for my household but this money is not enough for us.

— Soliman's father

Table 11 – Household work activities and estimated income in Dashte Kushk

Child, age and work	Household work activities	Estimated income (not including child labourer) ⁴⁸
Shakib age 13, sells mobile phone cards at border	Father: wage labourer at border two weeks/month (registered); looks for other wage labour when not working in group Mother: bakes bread for other households Older brother: wage labourer in Iran but has not sent remittances yet	1,500-2,000 Afs/month (aggregated from two weeks of work/month); other income depends on availability of wage labour 200 Afs/month Nil
Fawad age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	Father: gardener at border (part of registered group)	1,600-2,400 Afs/month (income dependent on earnings of group)
Soliman age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	Father: wage labourer at border (registered); looks for other wage labour when not working in group	1,500-2,000 Afs/month (aggregated from two weeks of work/month); other income depends on availability of wage labour opportunities
Bilal age 16, in 7 th grade	Father: wage labourer Mother: makes quilts, cushions, etc. Aunt: makes quilts, cushions, etc.	2,000-2,500 Afs/month 100 Afs/month 100 Afs/month

⁴⁸ The estimated income per month per capita of the respondent households ranges from 333 Afs to 587 Afs, significantly lower than the poverty line of 708 Afs per month per capita.

Given the extremely limited livelihood options in Dashte Khushk, labour migration to Iran is prevalent among male adults and youth in spite of the risk and high cost. Shakib's parents, for instance, are fully aware of the risks involved in sending their 16-year-old son to Iran, but feel compelled to do so given their extreme economic insecurity:

R: Going to Iran is very dangerous, you know many people have been killed trying to pass the border, and they got shot by the Iranian police. Let me tell you one brief story about two people who were trying to cross the border with their car and the Iranian police shouted at them to stop their car, but they didn't hear them and so they got shot by the police. One was killed and the other is badly disabled.

I: You know these are the risks. So why did you send your son to Iran?

R: This is because of economic difficulties and because of my sickness. That's why I sent him to Iran at his small age.

— Shakib's father

In addition to the chronic livelihood insecurity of the case households, respondents report suffering from the effects of two recent shocks: first, the unusually harsh winter in Herat that resulted in deaths, frostbite, and loss of livestock; and second, the global rise in food prices.⁴⁹ At the time of fieldwork, prices of basic commodities such as wheat, flour and rice had increased by a third or even doubled. The effects of these shocks on the already marginal livelihoods of the respondents are evident in the following quotations from Fawad's household:

This winter the snow was very heavy and people had a lot of problems. We all lost some things; people lost their livestock. This winter was a catastrophe! Also the price of a bag of flour has become 2,000 Afs. [Thinking deeply] What should we do? Should we eat barley instead?

— Fawad's mother

Every morning, I get 100 or 120 Afs...I spend it on household expenses. Do you know how much flour costs nowadays? Two man of flour costs 200 Afs so I can hardly buy one man (4 kilos) of flour. This is not enough for my household. One man of flour costs one day's income. Our economic condition was better five years ago because one man of flour was only 10 or 15 Afs. At that time you could get food easily, but now it is very difficult.

— Fawad's father

Unlike Herat city, where the high rental costs are a strain on household resources, all case households in Dashte Kushk have their own house and well, and generally pay only 200-300 Afs per month for electricity. Although households have fewer expenses, they must also contend with low and limited income streams coupled with high food costs. Household expenditure is thus primarily on consumption needs, which are often met through buying goods on credit.

⁴⁹ IRIN, "Afghanistan: Rising food prices push two million into food insecurity - WFP," <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=76219>, 14 January 2008, (accessed 14 July 2008).

Table 12 – Household expenses and debt in Dashte Khushk

Child, age and work	Household expenses	Debt
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Shakib age 13, sells mobile phone cards at border	Housing: own house Electricity: 200-300 Afs/month Water: none (access to well)	5,000 Afs to shopkeepers and villagers for consumption and medical treatment
Fawad age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	Housing: own house Electricity: 200-300 Afs/month Water: none (access to well)	1,000 Afs to uncle for consumption; 2,500 Afs to shopkeepers for consumption
Soliman age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	Housing: own house Electricity: 200-300 Afs/month Water: none (access to well)	10,000 Afs to shopkeepers, tailor, butcher, etc.
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Bilal age 16, in 7 th grade	Housing: own house Electricity: 200-300 Afs/month Water: none (access to well)	10,000 Afs to uncle for consumption

As Table 12 shows, case households owe as much as 10,000 Afs primarily for consumption costs. In the case of Shakib, the burden of debt repayment is the primary reason for his older brother's labour migration to Iran five months ago. However, he has yet to send any remittances home due to the need to first repay his smuggling debt:

Paying our debts is a burden on our shoulders, which is why my son should find a good job, so that he is able to pay back. He has been there for five months and still he has not been able to save any money. He has not even been able to repay the money for the smuggler.

– Shakib's mother

In the context of the marginal livelihoods available in Dashte Kushk, children's work and income – no matter how meagre – are central to their households' survival. This is particularly true for Fawad and Soliman, whose monthly income of 1,000-1,500 Afs is comparable to that of their fathers. Shakib started selling mobile phone cards at the border only two weeks prior to his interview and only works every other day. His projected monthly income of 400 Afs, while no doubt useful, does not appear to be as essential to the survival of the household, as his parents are pinning more hopes on their older son to send remittances from Iran for consumption and debt repayment. Most of the children's income goes directly to their parents to spend on household consumption needs, with only 5-10 Afs kept for their own transportation and lunch at the border. Fawad's case illustrates tension regarding the use of his income:

You know if I don't have money I ask my mother to give me some money and she gives me if she has. She is so kind to me but whenever I ask my

father to give me some money, he asks many different kinds of questions, like what do you want to do with the money?

– Fawad

I: What does he do with the money?

R: He gives this money to his mother. But he often tells his mother that he has not earned anything. [Laughing] But you know, when he tells his mother this, she looks through his pockets and usually finds some money.

– Fawad's father

Table 13 – Children's estimated earnings and usage in Dashte Khushk

Child, age and work	Estimated earnings	Use of earnings	Child access to earnings
Shakib age 13, sells mobile phone cards at border	400 Afs/month	Gives to father for household consumption	Given 10 Afs/day for transportation and lunch
Fawad age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	1,000-1,500 Afs/month	Gives to mother for household consumption	Given 10 Afs/day for transportation and lunch
Soliman age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	1,000-1,5000 Afs/month	Gives to mother for household consumption	Given 10 Afs/day for transportation and lunch

The fathers of both Soliman and Shakib explicitly state that their household survival would be threatened if their sons did not work full-time. This negates even the possibility of combining work with school:

I: If Soliman both works and studies, would that be possible?

R: No, it would not be possible; it would impact the household income. At the moment he is earning 100 Afs; if he continues both he would get less money and it will not be enough for our household consumption.

– Soliman's father

At the moment I can hardly buy a kilo of sweets on credit because the shopkeepers know that I do not have money to repay it. Then how will it be possible to support my children in school and meet the household expenses?

– Shakib's father

The economic imperative is so strong in the case of Fawad's household that his father, although aware of the risks involved in working at the border, prioritises income generation at all costs, whether licit or illicit. For Fawad's father, the most important responsibility of a child who is poor is to help support his family:

I: What is your opinion about children who are working at the border?

R: The important thing for them is to bring money home. Either they are stealing or are working as loaders in the group. Poor people need money to support their families.

I: In your opinion, then, poor children should work?

R: Yes, they should work.

— Fawad's father

In spite of the strong economic motivations for using child labour, the decision to send children to work is not always clear-cut. In the following quotation, Soliman's mother illustrates the dilemma faced by these households, which must juggle the competing priorities of the well-being of the household versus that of the child:

R: This is the amount of money my son earns in five days.

I: [counted the money] There are ten twenties here! Did Soliman give this money to you?

R: Yes he gave this money to me and told me to go to the doctor to buy some medicine. But I cannot spend this money on myself and my medicine. I might become better by just taking a little medicine, like pills. [Saddened] I do not want to spend Soliman's money on myself! I sacrificed myself for him and I do not want to spend his money on myself. My poor son...the little money he can earn daily should not be spent on me or on household expenses. I just want to cry! Have a long cry, but I am not able to, I just do not know what to do!

— Soliman's mother

8.3 Household composition and gender norms

The limited livelihood options in Dashte Khushk make access to male labour crucial for household survival, either to compete for work at the border or in Iran. As Soliman's mother describes:

People who have many male household members have better lives than others, because they can go to Iran and earn more money. Here there is nothing, no jobs, no opportunities.

— Soliman's mother

In this context, particularly when the male head of household is hampered either by illness or old age, the child is often seen as a labour resource:

R: I was convincing him to continue school but when he made the decision to leave I also became happy, I told him if you are willing to leave school then I also have no problem with that.

I: What do you mean you were happy?

R: (Smiled) I became happy because we got one more income earner.

— Fawad's father

All case households have a male head of household alive and working, albeit for low and irregular income, and in two cases (Shakib and Fawad) the households have access to other sources of male labour in the form of older sons (see Table 14). In Shakib's case, however, his older brother's income is to be diverted to debt repayment. In Fawad's household, his 24-year-old brother is saving for the high bride price that is customary in Dashte Khushk. Hence, neither brother contributes his income to the household. In spite of the presence of male income earners, therefore, the diversion of their income to other priorities such as debt repayment or marriage can result in the younger child shouldering the burden of household survival.

Table 14 – Household composition and children’s activities in Dashte Khushk

Child, age and work	Household size and composition	Work and school activities of siblings
CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Shakib age 13, sells mobile phone cards at border	4 people: mother and father; 2 sons ages 14 to 16 years; 8 previous children all deceased	16-year-old brother stopped school at 4th grade, worked at border, has been doing wage labour in Iran for the last 5 months
Fawad age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	6 people: mother and father; 4 children ages 13 to 24 years (3 girls, 1 son)	18- and 19-year-old sisters never went to school; 17 year old sister stopped school at 4th grade
Soliman age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	9 people: father and two wives; 6 children ages 2 to 15 years (3 girls, 3 sons)	15 year old brother attending 7th grade at Islam Qala school; 11-year-old sister attending school; 9-year-old sister stopped school at 2th grade
NON-CHILD LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS		
Bilal age 16, in 7 th grade	7 people: mother and father; 4 sons ages 7 to 14 years; paternal aunt	All children except 7-year-old boy, who will enrol next year, attending school

The pressure for boys to work also results from a lack of opportunities for women’s work and their resulting inability to contribute to household income. Unlike in Herat city, where women can engage in a variety of livelihood activities such as carpet weaving, pistachio shelling, and wool spinning, in Dashte Khushk female respondents report having little to no access to income generating activities:

Yes, we three – mother and two daughters – do not work and are only consumers. The men bring the money and we use it. But what should we do, there is no work for women to do here... My sisters are in Iran and their situation is much better than ours, they have a lot of gold. There they can clean saffron or shell pistachios. But here what can women do? Everyone is hungry and has nothing to eat...

– Fawad’s mother

With the burden of income generation on the male members of the household, sending boys to work diversifies income streams. This implies that providing women with work opportunities – most likely home-based in view of the norm of female seclusion – can serve to expand households’ labour resources without resorting to child labour.

8.4 Education as an alternative to work

Given the chronic livelihood insecurity facing these households, investment in education is a risky proposition, made even more undesirable by the appalling school

conditions in Dashte Khushk.⁵⁰ Soliman's mother expresses opinions typical of those heard throughout the village:

I: How is the school in Dashte Khushk?

R: It is not good, it is worse than I could possibly start to explain. It does not comply with what a school should have, like good teachers and lessons, and it is not clean.

— Soliman's mother

In addition to the dire physical condition of the school building, respondents complained about the unprofessional and exploitative conduct of the teachers. Not only are teachers unqualified and untrained, all of them having studied no further than 7th grade themselves: many are also chronically absent or late, and engage in inappropriate conduct, such as taking bribes in exchange for good grades and exploiting students for manual labour. The cost of school materials such as textbooks and pens also hinders school attendance, particularly as these households struggle to afford basic necessities. For Fawad's household, however, school costs do not seem to be the main reason for either Fawad dropping out of school or his reluctance to re-enrol. Rather, the dismal quality of schooling available in this village makes working at the border — even with all of its risks — a more attractive option to children and parents alike:

R: One day after school, one of the teachers took him to work on constructing his house. Fawad was there until dark. When he came home and told me about this, I became very angry. I saw that blood was coming from his fingers because he had been carrying bricks. After that I told him not to go back to school. The next day when Fawad did not go to school, his mother asked why and when she found out she took him to complain to the principal. But the teacher denied that he had taken Fawad to work on his house. After that his mother became less interested in him going to school...

I: Is it that he didn't have school materials and that is why he left school?

R: That was not a big deal, we would be able to provide the materials somehow, but he himself was not interested in schooling, he was complaining everyday about the teachers. He used to say the teacher beat him.

— Fawad's father

Table 15 — Education of parents and child in Dashte Khushk

Child, age and work	Parents' education	Child's education
Shakib age 13, sells mobile phone cards at border	No formal education	Dropped out of school last year at 5th grade
Fawad age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	No formal education	Dropped out of school two years ago at 6th grade
Soliman age 13, loads trucks (unregistered), sells fuel at border	No formal education	Dropped out of school two and a half years ago at 5th grade
Bilal age 16, in 7th grade	Father studied till 8th grade	Enrolled in 7th grade in school in neighbouring town

⁵⁰ Please see Section 7.3 for a detailed description of the school facility.

Girls are also likely to be removed from school, but often for different reasons than boys. Several respondents refer to gender norms and fears of kidnapping in explaining their decision to stop their daughters' education. Engaging in *mokhi* – two families exchanging daughters as wives for their sons – is common, due in large part to the extremely high bride price that is customary in this village. Girls therefore leave school as they enter puberty, either to abide by female seclusion norms or to marry. Although this study focuses on border work and does not include cases of female child labour, it does not mean to imply that such cases do not exist in Dashte Kushk. Girls are likely subjected to long hours of household chores either in their natal or marital homes, which deprive them of their right to education and put them at risk of physical and psychosocial harm.

8.5 Influence of community norms and role models

None of the parents in the child labour households have had any exposure to formal education, nor do they have literate, educated people in their social network. Only one respondent, Soliman's mother, could recall an example of a positive role model who had resisted his father's efforts to take him out of school and went on to become a doctor. The school in Dashte Khushk has existed for only six years, with little evidence that the community has begun to view education as a norm in that time. To the contrary, the norm for children in Dashte Khushk is clearly to work, specifically at the border, versus attending school. Norms exert powerful influence over not only parents' decisions to send their children to work but also children's own disinterest in school and desire to work. As Fawad's father notes, peer influence factors heavily into children's own attitudes and actions:

R: A person does what the majority does.

I: Are there people in your neighborhood who have the same economic status but send their children to school?

R: No, there are not. I am sure if there were children going to school, Fawad would also be interested in schooling and would not have left his school.

– Fawad's father

I: Since when did Soliman stop going to school?

R: 2.5 years ago...

I: Why is this?

I: He did not pass his exams, and was shy about sitting in the same class again. Also all the neighbours' sons flunked and started doing loading work instead. They are not interested in being in school. They would rather work than go to school. They are interested in going to the border.

– Soliman's mother

The influence of peer groups becomes particularly significant in middle to late childhood, when children begin to move beyond the family sphere into the social context of peer relationships.⁵¹ Respondents note the role of peer groups in children deciding to work as well as in choosing work type. As Shakib's mother explains, his friends influenced his decision to begin selling mobile phone cards at the border:

Shakib has friends around here and he follows their example. One of his friends said that there are no teachers at the school, so what is the benefit of going to school? He said they should go to the border and sell Roshan

⁵¹ Woodhead, *Psychosocial impacts of child work*.

cards and no longer go to school. So my son stopped school and started working.

— Shakib's mother

The culture of competition and one-upmanship in Dashte Khushk adds another dimension to the power of community norms:

R: There is something that I want to tell you. You know there is a proverb that says rivalry has replaced religion.

I: What do you mean by this?

R: If I send my son to the customs area to earn money then my neighbour will also do the same thing, or if I have a beautiful house then my neighbour will also try to have one by earning money whether through the right or the wrong way. The thing is to have the same status in the neighbourhood.

— Fawad's father

The strong emphasis on maintaining status in the community appears to lead to a form of negative role modelling, whereby behaviours such as child labour and illicit employment are emulated by others in order to achieve the same or greater level of material well-being. However, if status in Dashte Khushk is indeed equated with material success, this implies that status can be re-conceptualised to have different meanings and measures. Shifting community values and norms towards education, then, could be a key component of strategies to keep children in school and out of work. Any effort to reorient community values must also be accompanied by a significant improvement in the quality of instruction and infrastructure at the Dashte Khushk school.

8.6 Resignation and powerlessness

Living in a context of chronic poverty with few options for bettering one's condition has led to a powerful feeling of resignation and despair among the respondents. Like adults, children are constrained by the very limited options for work in Dashte Khushk and the surrounding area, and therefore have little choice of work activity. Respondents explained that children work at the border because there is no other work available, and that the few opportunities for apprenticeships are typically reserved for the relatives of shop owners. The need for *wasita* or connections is a theme that consistently emerged through the interviews with parents from child labour households. In order to obtain permission to work at the border or engage in particular work activities, respondents felt that they needed to know someone with authority or influence who would advocate on their behalf:

I: Has he ever looked for such positions?

R: No we have not looked for such work. If we had been looking we would not have found anything anyway because we are poor and we do not know anyone — we have no wasita. Yes there are many shops in the bazaar, but we do not know anybody!

I: Why is he selling mobile cards? Why not pushing carts at the border?

R: We have neither a push cart nor permission. If we had had a cart we would not have been able to use it to work at the border.

I: But why is that?

R: The group leader says he is too small.

I: Once I went to the border and I saw many children at the same age of Shakib working there, pushing carts.

R: That might be. But they might know someone. They must have wasita to work there.

— Shakib's mother

Note, however, that Shakib's mother assumes that her son would not find alternative work even though she has not attempted to look for such opportunities. This sense of hopelessness and resignation was observed to be particularly deep-seated among female respondents, who attributed their powerlessness to the social limitations of their gender. Fawad's mother, for instance, would prefer to enrol her son in the school in Islam Qala, which she has heard is of better quality than the one in Dashte Khushk, but feels constrained by her lack of agency and mobility as a woman:

I: But since he had a bike, why did he not go to school in Islam Qala instead of in Mir Hakim?

R: Because if you want to change schools, then you have to bring the documents to Kohsan. But I was not able to do this: I was alone, I am a woman, I could not do this. My brother took his son's documents from Kohsan to Islam Qala, and now he is in 6th grade and also learning to use the computer. He was a man, he could go and do this kind of work. But I cannot, because I am a woman.

— Fawad's mother

Their sense of personal agency severely eroded, Fawad's parents see planning for the future by investing in their children's education as a luxury of the rich:

I: In your opinion, which is better: work or education?

R: Education is better. But only those people who are wealthy and can afford their household expenses can send their children to school. But we have economic problems and I cannot afford school items for my son...if you are wealthy then education is good, but if you are poor then work is good.

I: What plan have you made for the future, in order to improve your life situation?

R: Those people who have a hundred livestock, they have future planning, I have only nine sheep, what plan can I have for the future?

— Fawad's father

Fawad's mother encapsulates this "short-termism": "I just want to have food on the table for tonight and I do not care about tomorrow." The urgency of survival in the present trumps any plans that may require a long-term investment. In addition to citing their lack of connections as a barrier to Soliman obtaining an apprenticeship, his mother objects to the length of time it would take to derive any financial benefit. The following quotation illustrates the complex interaction of factors — limited alternatives, lack of connections, peer influence and norms, and long-term payoff — that keeps Soliman working at the border:

I: Did you not suggest that Soliman go somewhere else to work instead of the border?

R: No, there are only working opportunities for young boys around the border, no other places...

I: He started working at the border, just because he knew that place?

R: Yes, he knew that place because all other children go there. There are not any other opportunities to work. An apprenticeship does not pay and there are not any opportunities for apprentices anyhow. If they are paid it will only pay for the costs of one or two pieces of bread.

I: What about working in a bakery? If he were to work there, he might become a master, no?

R: It would take him a long time to become a master baker, and until then what are we supposed to live on?

— Soliman's mother

Respondents' sense of hopelessness may feed into and be perpetuated by the lack of community cohesion observed in the village. Several respondents reported that help relations were strikingly lacking among the villagers, suggesting an absence of the strong social networks apparent in much of Afghanistan and which form an important safety net for poor households. Instead, households appear quite insular, and there is an immense sense of distrust and suspicion even among neighbours, due in part to superstitious beliefs around "blood stealing"⁵² as well as legitimate fears of criminal activity. Interviews with Soliman's mother, for instance, reveal a sense of isolation and fear, which in turn is linked to the deep depression observed by her interviewers and by the respondent herself:

R: I do not open my door to everyone who knocks. I am afraid of kidnappers and blood stealers. We people keep away from strangers.

I: Why is that? How come? Did anything like that ever happen?

R: Not here, no. But I heard about such things happening in other villages, which is why I do not open my door. For example this morning a boy came and knocked at the door, but I did not open the door because I was alone. Finally I went to ask from behind the door who was there, and I found it was one of our relatives' son who had come to deliver an invitation card for a wedding party. Even after I asked him to introduce himself and I climbed the wall to see who was really there, I finally asked him to throw the card over the wall. Because I was alone, not even the old lady (first wife) was here.

I: What about your neighbours? How is your relationship?

R: I do not have any relations with them. They are not my relatives, and neither of them are my mother nor my sisters. I do not know my neighbours.

I: [surprised] You really do not know them?

R: Well, I know their names, and we say hello to each other, but I do not go to their houses and they do not come to mine.

— Soliman's mother

Soliman's mother also notes the lack of community cohesion and organisation in response to community-level issues. When asked if the neighbours might agree on a common solution to the problem of rabid dogs in the area, Soliman's mother explains that people keep dogs to guard against intruders and thus would not willingly lose that protection even though the dogs were becoming a menace in the community. This sense that people are only concerned with their own well-being suggests that there would be little community mobilisation around the issue of child labour, as well as little mutual support and protection for children exposed to risks at the border:

R: No one helps us. If any help like bags of rice or flour, or clothes come to our village, it only reaches the widows, but the arbobs take it for themselves. If they give some to the widows, they will just give a little to them, but not to us!

I: Does anyone take care of Fawad while he is working at the border?

⁵² Several respondents, especially women, reported hearing stories of people taking the blood and organs of children to sell.

R: No, everyone just cares about himself.

– Fawad’s mother

Both children and parents from the child labour households acknowledge that working at the border does not impart any skills that can be used in the future to secure a more stable and improved livelihood. Respondents nonetheless perceive border work as the only viable option given the context of chronic poverty, limited employment opportunities, poor quality and high cost of education, and community norms regarding children’s work in Dashte Khush. Decisions to use child labour result from a combination and interaction of such factors – chiefly economic necessity and poor school quality – which are perpetuated by and feed into a general sense of fatalism, keeping households trapped in a self-fulfilling prophecy of poverty and powerlessness.

8.7 Key characteristics of the non-child labour household

Bilal’s non-child labour household faces many of the same challenges as its child labour counterparts, yet demonstrates significantly different responses. In this section, the unique characteristics of Bilal’s household are analysed in order to provide greater insight into their different perceptions of and responses to livelihood risk. A summary of these traits can be found in Box 6 below.

Box 6 – Key characteristics of the non-child labour household

- Greater commitment to education, in part due to parents’ regret over their own lost opportunities for education
- Involvement in children’s education
- Awareness of the roles and rights of children, most notably the right to education
- Refusal to accept child labour as the norm
- Greater awareness of the risks of work versus the positive moral and behavioural outcomes of school
- Greater demonstration of parental supervision
- More stringent criteria in determining appropriate activities for children
- Greater demonstration of agency and creativity in keeping children in school
- Greater demonstration of long-term planning
- Sense of hope and possibility of a brighter future

Bilal’s father is trained as a mason but has no regular employment. Instead, he looks for wage labouring opportunities in Dashte Kushk and the surrounding area, and his income – at approximately 2,000 Afs/month – is low and sporadic. Unable to afford firewood during the harsh winter, his children collect bushes every morning before going to school. The scarcity of employment opportunities led him to consider crossing illegally into Iran in the hope of finding work and even returning to his former drug trafficking activity, but his wife said that the household would “eat barley bread, just so that he would not have to go.”

Like the child labour households, Bilal’s parents lament the inferior quality of education available in the village and appear to have few positive role models in their social network. Bilal’s mother was able to recall only one relative in Herat city who has an education and earns a comfortable living through his English and computer skills. However, unlike the other respondents who are all uneducated, Bilal’s father obtained an 8th grade education before he was forced by his father’s death to drop out of school to become the household’s main breadwinner. This greater exposure to

education and regret over his premature exit from school likely explain his appreciation for education and the benefit that it can bring. Unlike the child labour household respondents, who speak of the value of education in a general or theoretical fashion, Bilal's father links education to concrete gains such as future employment and the development of the country:

After I migrated to Iran, I couldn't find a job and I was just doing wage labouring. At that time I thought to myself that if I had been educated I would be able to find a good job there. I still face this problem and I regret so much not finishing school. Because of this experience I encourage my children to go to school in order to have a bright future and be able to serve this country.

– Bilal's father

Interestingly, although Bilal's father's 8th grade education has not resulted in permanent or high-paying employment for himself, he retains a belief in the value of education and instead focuses on the need for higher education in order to achieve returns on the investment. His educational aspirations for his own children, therefore, include not only basic literacy and numeracy skills, but also a university education:

I: Why do you think you haven't been able to find a job since you've studied up to 8th grade?

R: People are not hired for government or NGO jobs if they did not complete their education. People must have at least graduated from 12th grade. In the customs office, I would be able to find a job as a clerk but the salary is only 2,000 or 1,500 Afs per month so that is not enough. That is why I cannot find work even though I've studied until 8th grade.

– Bilal's father

Bilal's parents differ from the child labour household respondents in their acute sense of what is proper or right for a child. In contrast to Fawad's father, for instance, who lists the rights that children can claim from their parents as marriage and imparting religious principles, Bilal's father explicitly states the child's right to education:

Children have two kinds of rights that their parents should fulfil: one, the parents should send children to school to complete their education; two, the parents should marry their sons to girls. Now I see families that send their children to customs and the children do not know if it is right or wrong to steal things from people. It means that the parents abuse the rights of the child.

– Bilal's father

According to Bilal's father, sending children to work not only violates their rights, but also affects their ability to discern right from wrong and results in anti-social behaviours. He perceives school, on the other hand, to have positive moral outcomes, in part by keeping children away from negative influences. Similarly, his wife views the role of the child as simply to study, and notes not only moral benefits but also positive psychosocial outcomes from education:

Childhood is not a time for work, it is a time for schooling...the only duty children have is to learn and to study. They should learn how to socialise with others in school. Working is not their duty. Since they have been in school, their behaviour has improved. Before they used to fight with each

other and swear a lot. But since they have been in school they no longer hang around in the streets or use bad language.

– Bilal's mother

If school is the place where children learn positive morals and behaviours, then Bilal's parents view work – particularly work at the border – as replete with immoral and destructive activities and influences. Furthermore, they deem the risks and hazards faced by children at the border – such as injuries, accidents, kidnappings and police harassment – unacceptable under any circumstances. In contrast to several child labour household respondents, who emphasize income generation through any means, regardless of the risks or legality, Bilal's parents are adamant that their children should be protected from any and all negative influences. They exhibit far greater levels of parental supervision than their child labour counterparts:

R: Those children who go to work are very different from those children who go to school. The children who work can develop bad habits like smoking hashish, cigarettes, stealing, and having bad behaviour. The children who go to school know how to behave with their parents, with their elders and how to behave with other children. I do not allow my children to sit with those children who go to customs to work because they will also learn those bad habits.

I: Do you know any children who smoke hashish or steal?

R: Yes, there are children at customs who do not go there for work, they go to steal fuel and passengers' belongings. They do these kinds of illegal things.

I: What do you think about these children's future?

R: Their future belongs to God, I cannot say anything, but as far as I know, their future is completely dark. It is up to their parents to send them to school. You know, my son is also able to work but I don't allow him to work because it is better that he goes to school and does his homework.

– Bilal's father

Bilal's father fiercely resists the norm of children working at the border, stating: "We cannot call this work...it is a form of cruelty to send children to work." He and his wife are equally circumspect about other, non-border related activities for their children. They clearly prioritise education, and would only allow extra-curricular activities – such as learning vocational skills – if these do not compete with school, are not too far from home, and do not expose their children to negative behaviours or ill-treatment. Shop-keeping, construction, street vending, and mechanic apprenticeships are all deemed to be unacceptable work activities for children, with only tailoring mentioned by Bilal's mother as a safe and non-taxing option. The degree of oversight and discernment exhibited by Bilal's parents regarding appropriate activities for their children is in sharp contrast to the parents from child labour households, whose concerns about risks are either overridden by economic exigency, or tempered by their acceptance of children's work as the norm.

Bilal's household also demonstrates a much greater sense of agency than non-child labour respondents. Unlike the female respondents from the child labour households, who lament the lack of opportunities for women's work, both Bilal's mother and aunt regularly engage in work activities including making cushions, quilts, saddlebags and clay ovens in order to afford school materials for the children. The women of the household also use creative solutions to ensure that the children have the school materials they need, such as using rice sacks to make schoolbags. Even the children are actively involved in this effort, saving the little pocket money received from their father to buy and sell sweets at school and using the earnings on notebooks and

pencils. The considerable maturity, agency, and entrepreneurship demonstrated by the children testify to their parents' own positive attitude.

Bilal's household exhibits further agency in the concrete plans that have been made to ensure that the children can continue their education. Knowing that the school in Dashte Khushk does not go beyond 7th grade, Bilal's mother has already arranged to have her children live with her maternal uncle in Herat in the event that they must attend school in the city:

Next year this school might teach higher levels and then they will continue here. If not, they will go to Islam Qala school. If Islam Qala school does not accept them, then we are obliged to send them to Herat...my maternal uncle lives in Herat, and he told us if the children come to school in Herat they could stay in his house and come back once a week.

— Bilal's mother

In spite of the limited opportunities for high quality education in Dashte Kushk, Bilal's parents remain optimistic about the benefits that education can provide their children in the future. Bilal's father is extremely invested in his children's school performance and is the only respondent who is or has ever been actively involved in his children's homework and school life. Unlike their child labour counterparts, Bilal's parents retain a sense of possibility and hope for a brighter future that can only be achieved through educating their children:

R: Their father says that his children should be literate, so that their lives will be better and they will have more opportunities. And God will give them a bright future.

I: Do literate people become rich?

R: Yes, they can become wealthy...

I: Your situation is not good, but your children still go to school. How are you dealing with it?

R: We would not be satisfied if they were to stay illiterate.

I: What good does it bring to be literate?

R: If they are literate then they can go and work in an office at the border, or become a teacher in town or learn to work with computers so that they can work in an office somewhere.

— Bilal's mother

9. Experiences and Impact of Child Labour

All of the children in the Dashte Khushk child labour cases are below the legal working age of 15 years and have dropped out of school to work. Table 16 summarises each child's work history and daily routine, which illustrates their long work history and hours – particularly in the case of Fawad and Soliman – and their lack of leisure and play time.

Table 16 – Work history, daily routine and free time in Dashte Khushk

Child, age and work	Work history	Current daily routine	Leisure/free time
Shakib age 13, sells mobile phone cards at border	Two weeks in current activity; household chores, collecting bushes since one year old	Works about 32 hours per week at border Works from 8 am-4 pm, 4 days/week, 4 weeks/month; collects firewood and helps with house chores on Fridays	Plays sports with friends if has time
Fawad age 13, loads trucks (registered), sells fuel at border	Two years in current activity; several months vending snacks at the border	Works about 48 hours per week at border Works from 7am-3pm, 6 days/week, 2 weeks of group work and 2 weeks of odd jobs; grazes livestock, brings supplies to shepherd and collects firewood on Fridays and when not working at border	Occasionally visits relatives on Fridays if has time
Soliman age 13, loads trucks (not registered), sells fuel at border	Two and a half years in current activity	Works about 54 hours per week at border Works from 8am-5 pm, 6 days/week, 4 weeks per month; grazes sheep, collects firewood and does house chores on Fridays	Watches TV before going to bed at 10pm

9.1 Work conditions, risks and hazards

The three children in the child labour cases face a variety of physical and psychosocial risks as a result of their work at the border. Fawad and Soliman have been working at the border for the last two to three years, meaning that they have been performing heavy manual labour such as portering and loading/unloading trucks since they were 10 years old. In addition, both boys engage in transporting fuel for Iranian truck drivers from within to outside the customs area and may also be involved in stealing and selling fuel.⁵³ Fawad and Soliman perform physically hazardous manual labour, such as lifting and moving heavy loads from one truck to another, and are at risk of falling to the ground. While neither has suffered a severe injury as yet, all respondents could recall instances of serious, even fatal accidents involving children at the border:

⁵³ Fawad's father admitted to his son stealing fuel but later denied it in a follow-up interview. Both Fawad and his mother insist that he is involved in transporting fuel for truck drivers, but not in stealing *per se*.

Once, Fawad was unloading some heavy sacks off an Iranian truck onto an Afghan truck. When they do this, the trucks park very closely to each other, end on end. These sacks should be carried by four people, but Fawad was moving it by himself. While lugging the sacks backwards across the gap between the two trucks he suddenly fell! But luckily, he only fell onto the Afghan truck and not onto the ground...One of my neighbours' sons who also went to the border to work and did loading work fell from a truck! He broke both his arms and had a brain haemorrhage...he died very soon after.

— Fawad's mother

Respondents also report high risks of being run over, given the busy traffic at the border. Children engaged in illicit activities such as stealing fuel from trucks are particularly at risk of vehicular accidents as they hide and run from the truck drivers or the police:

I myself have seen many children hiding from the police; they hide under the trucks and are run over when the truck drivers start driving, because they cannot see the children.

— Fawad's father

In addition to physical hazards, the demanding nature of the manual labour performed at the border has a negative impact on the children's health and physical development. Fawad and Soliman experience extreme fatigue from their long work hours and physically demanding tasks: both boys work significantly longer hours than legally prescribed in the Afghan Labour Code and must also perform household chores such as livestock grazing and firewood collection in addition to their work at the border. Their only free day – Friday – is often taken over by household tasks, leaving little opportunity for rest or recreation. They describe the physical effects of their work – chronic pain, injuries, and fatigue – below:

I: How do you feel when you go home at night?

R: I feel pain in my back and also on my legs but my mother always massages me with ointment and I go to work in the morning.

I: Have you ever broken a bone or have been injured badly so that you were obliged to go to the doctor?

R: I remember once I hurt my wrist badly and it was swollen but I didn't go to the doctor because there was no money at home. So, I went to the village bone setter and he asked me to bring one egg with salt, he mixed them and dressed my hand.

— Fawad

He [Soliman] leaves for the border every day at 8 o'clock and comes back at around 5 in the afternoon. When he comes back he is very tired and does not even have energy to speak to us.

— Soliman's mother

Fuel-related activities also have detrimental physical effects. Fawad has developed a painful skin condition as a result of prolonged exposure to the fuel, which is handled without any kind of protective clothing. He has not been able to afford medical treatment:

My son's skin is covered in oil and he smells of oil...his whole leg has blisters and sores, boils and is red and heated. He washes his leg everyday

with a sponge and soap so to heal the sores. The skin is light and sensitive, so it is damaged by the fuel. But he has to work!

— Fawad's mother

The illicit nature of fuel-related activities also exposes children to the risk of arrest and harassment by the police. Respondents report personally witnessing or hearing of children being beaten and threatened by the police, which often occurs if the children have not complied with the common practice of bribing the police to turn a blind eye to their activities. A boy in Fawad's neighbourhood who also sells fuel at the border describes paying off the police and security guards, and the consequences of not doing so:

R: We also have to pay the police and the security guards when we cross into the border area. The policeman and security guard each gets 5 Afs, so in total we have to pay 10 Afs a day to both those guys.

I: Do you also work there?

R: Yes, I have been selling fuel for a week.

I: What will happen if the boys do not pay the police this money?

R: The boys tell us that the police will take the gallons and destroy them if they do not pay. They also told me that they slap their faces and hit the backs of the necks and then tell them to scam. So we have to pay the money to them.

— Fawad's neighbour

According to the border police commissioner, the proper procedure for handling cases of juvenile delinquency is to inform the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) or international NGOs which have staff at the border. Police supposedly rarely arrest or detain children accused of criminal acts, since the police would have to release them shortly anyway. However, it appears that the border police are either unaware of or do not comply with the procedure outlined by the commissioner. Upon a visit to the border, the research team witnessed four boys ranging in age from nine to 14 who had been arrested by the police for stealing. The two younger boys sat on the floor, handcuffed and tied with plastic bags to the metal headboard of a bed. One of the older boys had earlier been slapped by a policeman. The police, suspecting the boys of membership in a gang, interrogated them for the name of their leader. The police did not notify the boys' parents of their sons' arrests, nor had they informed AIHRC or the international NGO, even though they intended to transport the boys from the border to a nearby detention centre. The police officers present described incidents like this occurring at least once a week. Such practices exemplify the complete lack of protection for children at the border, as the main duty bearers (i.e. the police) themselves either perpetrate abuse or do not comply with the proper procedures for handling juvenile cases.

As the police mentioned, organised crime and gang activity exist at the border, although none of the respondents in Dashte Khushk report specific knowledge of such activities. Several respondents, however, did mention the risk of bullying and physical abuse by older or more powerful boys. Fawad switched from street vending to loading and unloading trucks due to exploitation and abuse by an older boy:

R: We four boys were working together, but the oldest one was a very bad boy and would beat us sometimes.

I: Why did he do that?

R: He was asking me to give him money or snacks from my supplies. When I refused to give him, he beat me.

I: Did he beat you only or the other boys as well?

R: He was only beating me because the other boys were giving him their snacks.

I: What did you do when he was beating you up?

R: I complained to the police and told them that this boy was beating me every day but they didn't pay any attention, then I told my father and he said to not do this work anymore.

— Fawad

The lack of adult supervision at the border heightens the risk of abuse, as do the passive and often uncaring attitudes of the police, many of whom themselves perpetrate exploitation and abuse, and are therefore unwilling to foster greater protection and accountability mechanisms. While adult workers often face the same risks, children are particularly vulnerable given their lower status and lesser physical strength. As described by Fawad and his mother, children often face discrimination and threats from adults who resent competition for scarce employment opportunities:

Every driver, though, has his own customers and will always sell more to the adults than the children, because the children are less powerful and have less to say in this situation.

— Fawad's mother

There are both good and bad wage labourers. Some of them are good and they help me out with loading while the rest of them are very strict and serious and they don't help me. They also tell me to leave this work and find myself another one but I'm not listening to them.

— Fawad

Work activities such as fuel selling and vending can be particularly risky due to their illicit, unregulated and informal nature, leaving children with little recourse to justice or protection. Wage labourers and others who work in groups are typically at less risk: their membership in a formally registered entity affords them official permission to work at the border and also provides greater guarantee of payment since earnings are divided equally. Even so, group workers have little voice when confronted with exploitative or unfair treatment. Fawad's account of corruption at the border illustrates a context in which workers have little power to challenge those with authority:

R: The head of the groups has two very beautiful houses. He made lots of money through this work because he is not paying the right amount of money to the wage labourers.

I: Has anyone complained about this?

R: No one can complain about this because he is a powerful man. Once someone asked him why he didn't pay them the right amount of money. Then the head of the groups slapped him and he got quiet. I think if we all stage a demonstration then he would be obliged to give us the right pay.

— Fawad

Witnessing, being threatened with, or experiencing physical hazards as well as exploitation and abuse by authority figures likely have a negative impact on children's psychosocial well-being. Work activities that demand children to engage in unfamiliar or uncomfortable behaviours can also result in feelings of stress. Shakib's work — while not as physically hazardous as that of Fawad and Soliman — nonetheless entails significant risk of psychosocial distress. This risk is due to both the incompatibility

between his work demands and his personality, and the pressure of achieving sufficient sales:

R: I was feeling shy when I was selling the cards.

I: Why did you feel shy?

R: I didn't like to shout at the people to buy my cards.

I: What about the rest of the card sellers?

R: They like to shout and they do but I don't like it.

I: Do you still not shout at the people?

R: No. I just stand at one point like a statue and whoever wishes to buy comes to me and asks for the card. I don't like to run toward people and shout at them to buy my cards.

— Shakib

He worries about selling his cards. If he sells many cards he is happy, and if he does not sell well then he is more upset and tired and does not want to return the following day.

— Shakib's mother

It is possible, however, that the psychosocial risks of Shakib's work are mitigated by the extent to which he feels valued or appreciated for his contribution to the household. While psychosocial effects are less easily inferred than physical ones, the following observation of the interaction between Shakib and his father suggests that parental encouragement can contribute to the child feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment through work:

In the beginning he couldn't shout at the people because he was shy but gradually he became familiar with other card sellers and learned how they sell the cards.

[Shakib smiled and looked at his father. His father also smiled.]

— Shakib's father

Also, unlike his counterparts who state that they have not learned anything useful from their work, Shakib identifies numeracy as an important life skill that he has obtained as a result of his vending work.

9.2 Educational impact of work

As described in Sections 8.2 and 8.4, the combination of economic necessity and poor school quality is integral to the decision of the child labour households to send their children to work. The impact of work on school performance can trigger the decision to drop out of school in order to work full-time. Fawad and Shakib both report the difficulty of juggling work demands with academic pursuits, particularly given their long work hours:

R: I left school because I didn't have time to do my homework and also I didn't have money to purchase school materials, whenever I went to school the teachers were asking me about my homework but when I didn't have it done they beat me up with a stick.

I: Why didn't you do your homework?

R: I went to graze the livestock after I got back from school so I didn't have time for doing my homework and studying the books.

— Fawad

I: If you do both schooling and work, would that be an option?

R: No, it's not possible to continue both, you must do one of them.

I: Why do you think it's not possible?

R: This is because you won't be able to do your homework on time, and I think if you can't study at home you won't be able to continue your education.

— Shakib

In the case of Soliman, the shame of repeating a grade — itself a result of competing work and school priorities — prevents him from re-entering the school system:

He did not want to go back because he was ashamed in front of his classmates about having to attend the same class one year more, while they would all go to the class above.

— Soliman's mother

Due to the chronic poverty of many households in Dashte Khushk, interventions to eradicate the need for children to work must also work towards improving livelihood security. Furthermore, schools must be of high quality in order to provide an attractive alternative to work, as well as be inclusive of children who must continue to work.

9.3 Protective measures

Children, co-workers and parents demonstrate some protective measures in the attempt to reduce children's exposure to risk. Shakib, for instance, vends mobile phone cards in the company of other boys from Dashte Kushk who work together and help to look after one other. Fawad works in a group of labourers, some of whom help with carrying his load or allow him to rest when he is tired. For the most part, however, children and parents are limited in their ability to protect or seek redress for harms perpetrated, particularly since the authorities — for example, the police — are also often the abusers. The presence of a parent at the border can be a protective factor, as in the case of Fawad:

He often faces problems with the police. But the police know me very well because I have been working in this garden for a long time, and I ask them not to beat my son. One day I saw a policeman beating Fawad, he didn't know that he was my son. The police put my son in prison for three hours. I went to the police and told them that he was my son and promised he would not steal fuel again. Then they let him go.

— Fawad's father

Parents' awareness of and ability to mitigate risk also depends on their relationship with the child. Soliman's mother, for instance, reports little communication with her son, who emulates his father's dismissive and demeaning attitude towards women. As such, she demonstrates little awareness of her son's activities at the border, and even little concern for the risks entailed in his work. This does not mean, however, that parents do not care about their children's well-being, but rather that their fears are overridden by a complex interaction of economic necessity and normative behaviour:

It is not important who does what! It is just important that they work and that they bring back money for the family. Whether it is illegal or not, I do not care!

— Fawad's mother

I: Do you worry about him when he is at the border?

R: Not very much. There are many children working at the border – thousands of them! And they all do everything they can to earn some pennies. All of them are poor, which is why they have to go the border!

– Soliman's mother

The combination of hazardous and high-risk work with few protective measures leaves children extremely vulnerable to severe and long-term physical and psychosocial harm. Shakib, Fawad and Soliman are not only denied the moral, educational and psychosocial benefits of high quality schooling, but must also work in an environment with ubiquitous crime, exploitation and abuse. The study findings clearly demonstrate that border-related activities constitute “work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990), Article 32.

10. Limited Aspirations for the Future

Parents' aspirations for their children's future — as well as children's own aspirations — are shaped by the daunting realities of their educational and livelihood contexts. Shakib wistfully states his desire to be a doctor or teacher in the future, but he seems aware that the fulfilment of his ambition depends on resuming his education. This in turn will only be possible with an improvement in his household's economic condition:

I: What is your aspiration for the future?

R: (Smile) I'd like to be a teacher.

I: What else?

R: If I can't become a teacher then I will become a doctor.

I: How do you think it's possible to become a teacher or a doctor?

R: As I told you before, if my economic condition gets better then I will go to school and after that to Herat University, then I will become a teacher or a doctor. But if the conditions remain the same then I don't know what will be my future.

— Shakib

Fawad echoes the uncertainty that Shakib feels about his future. He also longs to return to school to become a teacher. But he recognises that the prevailing economic conditions of his household mean he must temper his ambitions:

I don't have big aspirations. The only aspiration I have is to be able to help support my family.

— Fawad

Fawad's father likewise appears to have given up on the possibility of his son obtaining future professional employment since he has discontinued his education:

If he were to continue his education then I would want him to be just like you guys working in an office, sitting in a chair and getting a good salary. But now that he is not in school anymore, it is up to him what he really wants to be.

— Fawad's father

Next year, when Fawad will be a mere 15 years old, his father plans to send him to work in Iran in spite of the many risks of illegal migration. This proposal reflects not only the limited livelihood alternatives available in Dashte Khush, but also the extent to which reduced access to education can drastically diminish aspirations for children's futures. Only Bilal's mother, whose children attend school and do not work, expresses unequivocal aspirations for each of her sons to become "something good." Note that her inclusion of tailoring as an accepted future occupation suggests that her ambitions for her children are not solely restricted to salaried employment. Rather, she was more concerned with meeting the criteria for decent, non-hazardous work:

I: What would you like your children to become?

R: I would like them to work with computers or to become doctors. They can also be tailors...Bilal says he would like to be able to repair the television by himself — once he fixed the neighbours' TV.

I: So what is Bilal going to be in the future?

R: He is going to be something good; he will be a doctor or an engineer.

I: What about Bilal's brother?

R: He will become whatever he likes. He is interested in drawing cartoons for television.

– Bilal's mother

Without the potential of education, the parents and children from the child labour cases view their futures as confined to the same narrow scope of options that limit the prospects of most other villagers in Dashte Kushk. The plans that Soliman's mother has for him differ quite dramatically from those for his older brother, who is attending school full-time:

I: What is Soliman going to do?

R: He is going to be a shepherd, but that is not so good because it does not make much money. It would be better to do wage labouring.

I: What about Soliman's brother?

R: Nothing – no work. He should become a doctor. He should study!

– Soliman's mother

As in most aspects of people's lives in Dashte Khushk, future aspirations are bound by a deep sense of resignation and powerlessness. This stems from the limited livelihood opportunities in the area as well as the systematic pattern of corruption, exploitation and non-responsiveness among border officials. Tackling the issue of child labour, therefore, involves not only eliminating hazardous or harmful work by children; it also involves reviving people's hope and confidence in the future by increasing livelihood security, improving school quality, and enhancing local governance and accountability. Without concerted effort and investment in these areas, the children and families of Dashte Khushk and the surrounding border villages are unlikely to achieve the peace and prosperity that have been denied to them for so long.

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