



Country Report

Towards Safer Schools for Children: Pakistan

Preventing Violence Against Children in
Schools in South and Southeast Asia



Coalition for
Good Schools





About Coalition for Good Schools

The Coalition for Good Schools is a collection of leading Global South practitioners committed to preventing violence against children (VAC) in and through schools across Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Coalition elevates insights and evidence-based interventions in order to provide critical tools, data and best practices for sustainable, local solutions. This ten-country document review series has been initiated by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools, coordinated by Samya Development Resources Private Limited (SAMYA).

The Asia Hub commissioned 10 country reports on the state of VAC in and around schools in the broader region, in collaboration with core partners in each context. Each report provides an overview of how violence manifests in educational settings, explores contributing social, cultural and economic factors for VAC in each context, and provides a brief review of the policy landscape, national leadership and strategy for ending violence. While school violence is the primary focus, violence in other physical and online settings is explored. These reports are thus developed for all those working on the issue of VAC, particularly for those who see schools as an ideal entry point for its prevention.

In the absence of systematic data collection on VAC in Asia's schools, these reports highlight data that are indicative of trends and point attention to existing gaps. These 10 reports are developed to stand alone, and are summarised in a scene-setting "Synthesis Report" which can be found on our website at www.coalitionforgoodschools.org.

Acknowledgements

This series of reports, produced by the Asia Hub of the Coalition for Good Schools presents background information, infographics and key resources that aim to foster change and development in both schools' settings and communities in the field of prevention of Violence Against Children across Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. This would not be possible without the diverse inputs of practitioners and researchers throughout each context. The Asia Hub is grateful to the following people for their contributions:

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Country Profile

PAKISTAN

Population



241.49

Million (Census, 2023)

Main ethnic groups



44.7%

Punjabi

15.4%

Pashtun (Pathan)

14.1%

Sindhi

8.4%

Saraiki

7.6%

Muhajirs

3.6%

Balochi

6.3%¹

Others

Languages



70%

Indo-Iranian

30%²

Indo-Aryan

Age Structure



36.01%

0-14 years

19.3%

15-24 years

40.25%

25-64 years

4.44%

65 years and above

GDP per capita



0.3%
(2023)

Poverty Rate



37.2%³

Literacy rate



58.9%
(est. 2023)

Key Findings

- ❖ Corporal punishment is highly common, with studies showing 91.4% of boys and 60.9% of girls experienced corporal punishment at school in the previous four weeks.
- ❖ Bullying and peer violence are common, with 50% of girls and 75% of boys engaging in peer violence, and 60% of university aged students reporting having experienced cyberbullying.
- ❖ Sexual violence impacts both genders and goes underreported due to social stigma; 41% of boys and 39% of girls report experiencing sexual abuse in childhood.

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/pakistan/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Pakistan

³ <http://www.wionews.com/south-asia/poverty-in-pakistan-up-from-44-to-54-world-bank-393089>

Overall snapshot of violence against children (VAC) in Pakistan

Pakistan faces significant challenges in addressing violence against children (VAC), with widespread occurrences in homes, schools, and online spaces. Despite legal protections, cultural acceptance and weak enforcement contribute to continued violence against children. The prevalence of child labour, child marriage and violent discipline remain alarming, even with considerable progress made in the legal frameworks currently in place (Magenta & UNICEF, 2022)⁴. 69% of children reported being hit/slapped by parents/caregivers.

The Sahil Foundation conducted a thorough investigation that revealed a startling 11% increase in the prevalence of child abuse cases in Pakistan in 2022, with a total of 4,139 reported incidences (Abro, 2023). According to another report, annually over 550,000 children in the nation are abused (The Nation, 2023). Socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, access to education, awareness levels and the effectiveness of child protection mechanisms can all influence the prevalence of child abuse in different areas (Naeem et al., 2019).

The literature on the causes of VAC is scarce in Pakistan. Although small sampled empirical studies have been conducted in metropolitan areas, numerous methodological flaws prevent generalisations to the full population (Zarkar, 2016).

Prevalence of different forms of VAC

1. Corporal punishment

Violence from teachers in schools has been reported as a common practice in Pakistan. In 2005, UNICEF, with Save the Children and the Pakistan government, conducted the first in-depth survey to determine the extent of corporal punishment. The study concluded that all 3,582 children interviewed said they had been beaten at school, while 7% said they had suffered severe injury as a consequence.

A study was done in two districts of Peshawar and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study found that corporal punishment is rampant (83%) in schools and madrassas. The study reveals that male students receive more punishment and exhibit higher levels of emotional adjustment, delinquency and aggression (Saeed et al., 2023). Another study conducted with 1,752 students in 6th grade aged 11–14 in 20 boys' and 20 girls' schools showed that 91.4% of boys and 60.9% of girls experienced corporal punishment at school in the previous four weeks (Khwaja, 2018)⁵. Although limited evidence is available, a study showed a significant association between school corporal punishment and academic performance, attendance, dropout ratio and mental health factors (Naz et al., 2011). Another study established that corporal punishment is the main reason for school dropout and deviant behaviour among students (Chitrali et al., 2014).

While there is limited official data on the prevalence of violent discipline of children at home, the data that exists suggests that it is both familiar and widespread. The primary sources of information for the analysis of violent discipline are the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys⁶ from

⁴ In partnership with UNICEF Pakistan, MAGENTA conducted a nationally representative study that documented VAC in Pakistan. The research team explored adult's and children's knowledge, attitudes and practices around four thematic areas: violent discipline, child labour, child marriage and birth registration.

⁵ A baseline assessment from a cluster randomised controlled trial to examine the prevalence of school corporal punishment by gender and the relationship to levels of peer violence at school, parent corporal punishment, youth food security, youth academic performance and school attendance in Pakistan. Forty homogenous public schools in the urban city of Hyderabad, Pakistan, were randomly selected for the trial to evaluate a youth violence prevention intervention.

⁶ UNICEF MICS Surveys. <https://mics.unicef.org/surveys>

Gilgit-Baltistan (2016-2017), Punjab (2017-2018), Sindh (2018-2019) [62], Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2019) and the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2017-2018). According to these studies, 80-85% of children aged between 1 to 14 years in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, had received violent discipline of some kind.⁷ These research findings align with UNICEF MICS data, showing that parents and caregivers commonly use violent discipline as a child behaviour management tool.

According to the KABP study conducted by UNICEF and MAGENTA (2022) showed that over 70% of children are beaten if they are perceived as disobedient, such as when the child talks back to the parent, does not want to attend school, or does not want to do his or her homework. Furthermore, nearly 70% of children in the study said that parents or caregivers would hit or slap a child if they are perceived as disobedient. The data collected indicates that there were minor variations between the area of residence, education, or a child's gender, suggesting that violent discipline is pervasive across the country, even though both children and adults emphasised that physical punishment was not as effective as non-violent methods, such as when a parent took time to explain why a behaviour was harmful.

2. Peer violence and bullying

Peer violence in Pakistan is rooted in poverty and the socialisation of children, especially at home. However, the data on the same is sparse (Karmaliani, 2017). Khawaja et al. (2015) found physical and verbal violence as a prevalent occurrence in major cities and provincial capital institutions of Pakistan. Peer violence is widespread among girls and boys in grade 6 in Hyderabad schools and the prevalence reported appears to be considerably higher than that found in research from many other settings (Karmaliani et al., 2017). Moreover, the same study reported that a large percentage of youth engaged in peer violence, specifically almost half of girls and three-quarters of boys, reported perpetration against peers. Strong connections between peer violence, poor academic performance, days of school missed emerged.

There is no denying the rise in complaints of bullying and cyberbullying in schools in recent years and this issue has been acknowledged as a significant public health concern. According to studies by Murshid (2017) and Musharraf and Anis-ul-Haque (2018), youth mental health problems like anxiety and depression are caused mainly by victimisation.

3. Sexual violence and harassment

Sexual abuse of children is another pressing issue that needs ample evidence and redressal. A retrospective study on the frequency of child maltreatment in Pakistan was recently released by Abbas and Jabeen 2020. The study included an equal number of male and female respondents. Of the respondents, 41% of men and 39% of women said they had experienced sexual abuse at some point in their upbringing. A poor parent-child relationship is one of the many relevant aspects of the current predicament. In Pakistan, child abuse—more significantly, sexual abuse—is a severe problem. The study also provided insight into the incidence of child maltreatment in the nation. A worrying 41% of respondents to this study, which had an equal split of male and female participants (44% men and 39% women), stated that they had been sexually abused as children.

According to reports from the Sahil organisation, child sexual abuse (different forms) is a grave concern (Imran et al., 2020). It is concerning that 2,123 instances were documented. This figure indicates a high rate of child sexual abuse, a problem that causes its victims to suffer long-

⁷ UNICEF and the Government of Pakistan. 2017. The Situation Analysis of Children in Pakistan: The State of Child Rights in Pakistan

lasting emotional and psychological damage. In addition to being distressing in the near term, child sexual abuse can have long-term psychological effects on those who are abused (Batool, 2017). As highlighted in the data, Punjab emerges as a concerning hotspot with high number of documented child abuse cases. In 2022, 3,035 cases were reported in this province alone. Several things could cause these regional variations. In 2020, the Associated Press found numerous accounts from Pakistani police, which alleged sexual harassment by Islamic clerics working in madrassas, or religious schools, across Pakistan, where many of the poorest children in the country would attend classes.

4. Cyberbullying and online violence

Cyberbullying and digital harassment - defined as the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person, including online threats and mean, aggressive, or rude texts, tweets, posts, or messages, posting personal information, pictures, or videos designed to hurt or embarrass someone else - have become severe problems for many young people in Pakistan. In Pakistan, physical and emotional bullying as well as cyberbullying are issues not just in postsecondary educational establishments, but in elementary and middle schools. While data indicates that bullying and cyber-risky behaviour are more common among young people, rules and initiatives aimed at limiting the adverse effects of both traditional and cyberbullying are uncommon in Pakistan (Naveed et al., 2020).

According to Saleem et al. (2021), there has been a noticeable rise in cyberbullying in Pakistani educational institutions. Cyberbullying in metropolitan universities is widespread, according to data collected from universities in the province of Sindh. Prior research by Musharraf and Anis-ul-Haque (2018) revealed that over 60% of college students engaged in cyberbullying. Similarly, Mirza et al. (2020) discovered that cyberbullying occurs often at universities. Bullying and cyberbullying are widespread in Pakistani schools and are not just a problem at universities (Naveed et al., 2020). According to Khawaja et al. (2015), children in big cities and province capitals frequently experience violence in the form of verbal and physical assault [44]. According to Asif (2016), victimisation and bullying are also linked to sub-par academic performance⁸ and are a contributing factor in the high school dropout rate.⁹

Drivers of violence

1. Normative factors

The cultural beliefs normalising violence as a means of disciplining is a critical factor in the prevalence of corporal violence. For instance, more than 70% of educators in Pakistan agreed that corporal punishment is an effective tool for student discipline (Chitrani et al., 2014). The occurrence of child abuse in various contexts can be influenced by socioeconomic circumstances, cultural norms, educational opportunities, awareness levels and the efficacy of child protective measures (Naeem et al., 2019).

2. Sexuality

In Pakistan, many LGBTQIA+ students have reported experiencing physical, mental and even sexual abuse due to societal and religious discrimination. This has led to students dropping out of school or deciding against continuing their education altogether. In addition, discrimination

⁸ Inamullah, H. M., Irshadullah, M., & Shah, J. (2016). An investigation into the causes and effects of bullying in secondary schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. *The Sindh University Journal of Education-SUJE*, 45(1).

⁹ Murshid, N. S. (2017). Bullying victimization and mental health outcomes of adolescents in Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 76, 163-169.

against LGBTQIA+ students results in many choosing not to express their identity. The lack of legal recognition for LGBTQIA+ children in Pakistan makes it difficult for them to take advantage of state-instituted child safety measures. Laws protecting LGBTQIA+ minors against coercive medical or psychological interventions that aim to change or hide their sex characteristics, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation do not exist.

3. Poverty

Pakistan has the world's second greatest number of school absentees (OOSC) and it is estimated that 22.8 million children between the ages of 5 and 16 do not attend school. Due to numerous factors, children may be excluded from school due to their socioeconomic status, the location in which they live or simply because of their gender. In Sindh, 52% of the poorest children, especially girls, stay out of school. In Baluchistan, 78% of girls remain out of school. Imran et al. (2020) have investigated the determinants of child labour, casting light on variables such as family income and parental education and employment status. The study highlights the economic aspect of child abuse and poverty's role in compelling children to work. Regions with higher poverty rates or lower access to quality education may experience higher rates of child abuse due to the increased vulnerability of children in such environments (Shah et al., 2023).

4. Conflict

While there has been a decrease in child fatalities due to explosive weapons and unexploded ordinances (UXO) in recent years, it remains concerning that child fatalities still increased by 32% in 2019¹⁰. The fact that over half (51%) of child abuse incidents in 2019 were caused by state actors raises even greater alarms. Increased cross-border firing and heightened tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir characterised this year, and at least 179 children have died because of the territorial struggle in Kashmir during the past ten years. Pakistan has high number of out-of-school children, with an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 not attending school, representing 44% of the total population in this age group (UNICEF, 2022). This is, in part, because of economic and socio-cultural factors as well as gaps in service provision – but it is also due to insecurity generated by explosive weapons.

Prevention and response to VAC

The Pakistani government has introduced a legislative framework to safeguard the rights and welfare of children. The Young Court System Ordinance 2000, an essential part of these reforms, addresses issues related to young offenders and their rights within the court system. The legal framework in Pakistan includes specific provisions addressing child sexual abuse. This form of abuse is treated as a criminal act and the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 classifies child molestation as an act of terrorism and violence (Raza et al., 2022).

These measures underscore the severity with which child abuse is regarded in the legal context. To align with international standards, Article 37(a) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises that no child should be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (Farmer, 2011). Pakistan has adopted this principle to protect its children from such forms of abuse.

However, implementation of child protection laws faces some legal ambiguities and challenges. For instance, the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2007 permits a certain degree

¹⁰ <https://aoav.org.uk/2020/the-impact-of-explosive-violence-on-children-in-pakistan/>. According to data collected by AOAV, between 2011 and 2019, 1,134 children were killed and injured by explosive violence.

of punishment for disciplining children with valid reasons. This law has not undergone revisions, leading to uncertainties in its interpretation and application, which hinders the effective enforcement of child protection laws.

Addressing these challenges and ensuring consistent and stringent enforcement of these laws are vital in safeguarding the well-being of children in Pakistan. Regarding cyberbullying for better protection, the Pakistani government has introduced a Crime Bill related to the Internet with different categories [69] such as the Electronic/Cyber Crime Bill 2007, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, and the Electronic Transaction Ordinance (ETO) 2002. The bill covers various issues, from electronic document recognition crime, electronic terrorism and cyberstalking to the denial of the services attacked. If found guilty, the perpetrator will be punished by a prison term of 3 months to 10 years¹¹.

Budget and policy

Pakistani government designed at least three types of budgets for child violence protection: strengthening the social welfare workforce at the decentralised level, strengthening systems and services to address VAC and funding for services for the child and women survivors¹². However, the average share of overall child-related spending in government budgets is around 6% for children, which covers 48% of Pakistan's population¹³.

Moreover, multiple challenges exist with implementing laws and policies to protect children from violence in schools. Corporal punishment, for example, is still lawful in the home. However, Article 89 of the Penal Code 1860, which states that “nothing which is done in good faith for the benefit of a person under twelve years of age...is an offence,” is often used as a legal defence for corporal punishment of children. Even the provisions against violence and abuse in the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2012, Sindh Child Protection Authority Act 2011, the Guardians and Wards Act 1890 and the Code of Criminal Procedure 1898 are not interpreted as prohibiting corporal punishment of children¹⁴.

However, some of the helpful legal provisions include the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2004 (art. 35) and the Sindh Children Act 1955 (art. 48). The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act 2010 prohibits corporal punishment “in all its kinds and manifestations”, but it states that this is “as provided under section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code 1860” (art. 33) and allows for ‘reasonable punishment’ by parents (art. 44), the definition of corporal punishment (art. 2) covers only that which reaches a certain severity.

The National Child Policy adopted in 2006 recognises the child's right to protection from corporal punishment, but there is no prohibition in law.

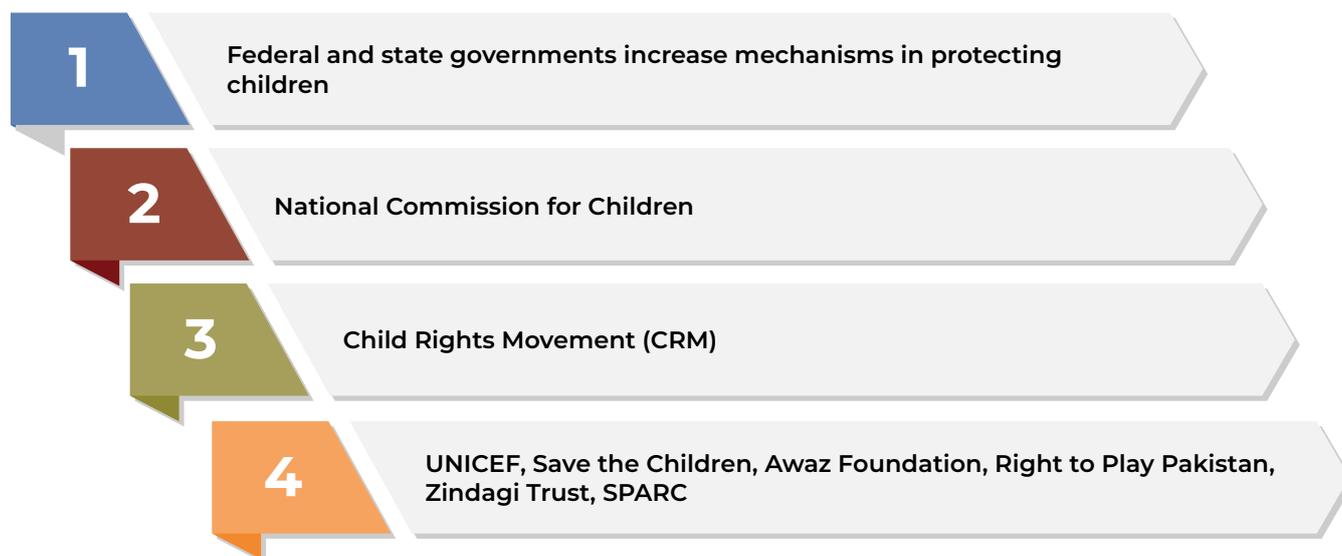
¹¹ <https://www.zameen.com/blog/cybercrime-laws-pakistan.html#Cybercrime-Laws-in-Pakistan>

¹² <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/child-protection-0>

¹³ <https://doi.org/10.20896/saci.v5i3.302,p.62>

¹⁴ <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/reports-on-every-state-and-territory/pakistan/>

Institutional Mapping of the country to deal with VAC



Priority and strategy for the way forward

Steps are being taken to move the country towards a more progressive policy stance against VAC. In December 2021, the President of Pakistan signed Act No. XLIX of 2021 that aimed to prohibit corporal punishment against children in the Islamabad Capital Territory. Section 3(2) of the new Act prohibits corporal punishment of children at the workplace, in public and private schools and in other educational settings, including formal, non-formal and religious institutions, as well as in child care institutions and the juvenile justice system.

The Act specifies that under no circumstances are corporal punishments or punishments related to the child's physical and mental development or that may affect the child's emotional status allowed (section 3(3)). It includes a list of sanctions and enforcement modalities for private institutions. However, it is essential to note that the Act does not prohibit corporal punishment of children in the home. Also, Act No. XLIX of 2021 is only applicable to the Islamabad Capital Territory. Corporal punishment still needs to be prohibited in the home, alternative care settings, daycare, some schools, penal institutions and as a sentence for crime in all regions of Pakistan.

Further commitments were made by delegates from Pakistan at the First Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children in Colombia in 2024, including strengthening and expanding integrated child protection services supported by a comprehensive policy framework, including strengthened laws on corporal punishment. The Government of Pakistan also pledged to build a more child-sensitive, gender-responsive workforce capable of providing equitable, necessary, appropriate and timely support to children in need.

Suggestions on the Way Forward

As the understanding of safety in educational environments continues to evolve, there is increasing recognition of schools as spaces where non-violent and just societies can be co-created. The findings presented here aim to inform a growing network of national and regional practitioners, policymakers, civil society groups, researchers and funders committed to preventing all forms of violence within Pakistan's schools.

While the Coalition for Good Schools encourages stakeholders to review the full recommendations outlined in the regional synthesis report, insights from the Asia Hub highlight key areas for action:

- **Education delivery system as an entry-point:** *The education system offers a strategic avenue for the prevention of violence against children. Effective multi-sectoral government action at the national level is crucial for catalysing these interventions.*
- **Children's experience and agency:** *Prioritising children's lived experiences within schools and fostering their agency should be central in education policies and interventions.*
- **Whole-school approach:** *Implementing a comprehensive, whole-school strategy that nurtures a positive school culture and upholds the inherent dignity of every child can produce long-term outcomes. Meaningful engagement with teachers, school staff, and the local community is essential for the success of such initiatives.*
- **Knowledge generation and dissemination:** *Ongoing documentation, sharing, and expansion of knowledge and evidence is vital for deepening understanding of effective interventions, strengthening local efforts and supporting scale through the education sector.*

There are proven solutions to end violence, and with collective effort, violence can be prevented within our lifetime. Awaz Foundation Pakistan: Centre for Development Services (AWAZCDS) has emerged as a strong voice through work with teachers to keep children safe from abuse at school. Right to Play Pakistan is scaling its play-based intervention that uses sport and play to empower children to reduce peer violence and corporal punishment, improve mental health, and change social norms in support of gender equality and non-violence, deepening impact through elements of a whole school approach. Groups like Zindagi Trust and the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) address corporal punishment through trainings on positive discipline and ongoing advocacy for improved national legislation.

Effective foundational interventions should incorporate several core elements:

- **Recognising schools' role in nurturing and developing children's potential.**
- **Promoting justice, equality, and empathy as foundational school values.**
- **Affirming children's rights and agency within the educational context.**
- **Supporting progressive pedagogies that encourage positive change.**
- **Honouring the dignity of every child, irrespective of gender, sexuality, race, caste, creed, or other categorisations.**

Prevention programmes must also adopt an intersectional perspective that acknowledges the overlapping and reinforcing characteristics that shape children's unique experiences of violence. This approach recognises that certain groups of children may face increased risks and that the severity and frequency of violence can vary considerably.

While sometimes sites of violence, schools also hold significant potential as primary sites for learning and implementing strategies to prevent it. School-based initiatives can yield multiple positive outcomes, serving as catalysts for broader change.

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