



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON  
THE RIGHTS OF CHILD

# The State of **CHILDREN** in Pakistan 2024

National Commission on the  
Rights of Child (NCRC)



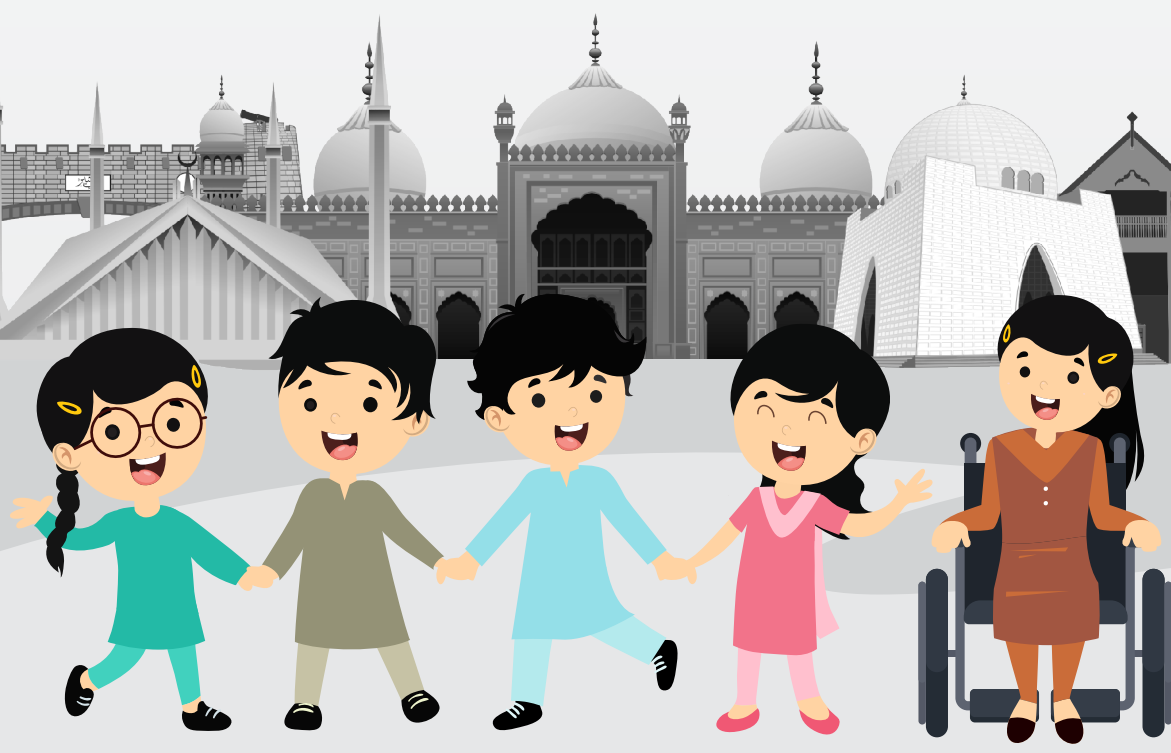




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**National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC)** is a statutory body established by the Government of Pakistan for the promotion, protection, and fulfilment of children's rights in Pakistan. NCRC has the mandate to examine and review policies, laws, practices, and proposals, inquire into violations of child rights, sponsor research, raise awareness, build capacities, provide technical support, and advise the Government on legislative and policy matters by virtue of the National Commission on the Rights of Child Act, 2017.

#### Acknowledgments:





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# Acronyms

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ALPs	Accelerated Learning Programmes
APFTU	All Pakistan Federation of Trade Unions
ASER	Annual Status of Education Report
BCG	Bacille Calmette-Guérin (Tuberculosis Vaccine)
BECS	Basic Education Community Schools
BHUs	Basic Health Units
BISP	Benazir Income Support Programme
BMI	Body Mass Index
BNP	Benazir Nashunoma Programme
CAR	Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees
CAT	Convention Against Torture
CAP	Child Advisory Panel
CCRI	Children's Climate Risk Index
CCW	Cyber Crime Wing
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEACR	Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations
CESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
CH <sub>4</sub>	Methane
CHH	Child-Headed Household
CMRA	Child Marriage Restraint Act
COP	Child Online Protection
CPDI	Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives
CPIs	Child Protection Institutes
CPUs	Child Protection Units
CP&WB	Child Protection and Welfare Bureau
CRIN	Child Rights International Network
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CRVS	Civil Registration and Vital Statistics
CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
SAM	Child Sexual Abuse Material

CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
CrPC	Criminal Procedure Code
CSV	Child Sexual Violence
DCPU	District Child Protection Unit
DDMAs	District Disaster Management Authorities
DEPIx	District Education Performance Index
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
DRAP	Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan
DRF	Digital Rights Foundation
DTP	Diphtheria, Tetanus, and Pertussis
DTP3	Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis (Third Dose)
DVC	District Vigilance Committee
DVCs	District Vigilance Committees
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
ECPAT	End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes
ESP	Education Sector Plans
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FCTC	Framework Convention on Tobacco Control
FDE	Federal Directorate of Education
FIA	Federal Investigation Agency
FIR	First Information Report
FSC	Federal Shariat Court
GAVI	Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GU	Generation Unlimited
GDI	Gender Development Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
HDI	Human Development Index
HepB	Hepatitis B
HepB3	Hepatitis B (Third Dose)

Hib	Haemophilus Influenzae Type B
Hib3	Haemophilus Influenzae Type B (Third Dose)
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
ICT	Islamabad Capital Territory
ICCMC	International Catholic Migration Commission
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICSE	International Child Sexual Exploitation
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILC	International Labour Conference
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IRC	International Rescue Committee
IHDI	Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index
ISPs	Internet Service Providers
ITA	Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi
JJCs	Juvenile Justice Committees
JJSA	Juvenile Justice System Act
KAP	Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
KPCLS	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Labour Survey
KPCPWC	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Commission
LAJA	Legal Aid and Justice Authority
MCV	Measles-Containing Vaccine
MCV1/MCV2	Measles-Containing Vaccine (First/Second Dose)
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoHR	Ministry of Human Rights
MoFEPT	Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training
MoNHSR&C	Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations & Coordination
MoPD&SI	Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
NADRA	National Database and Registration Authority

NCC	National Curriculum Council
NCHD	National Commission for Human Development
NCHR	National Commission for Human Rights
NCMEC	National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children
NCRC	National Commission on the Rights of Child
NDMA	National Disaster Management Authority
NEF	National Education Foundation
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NHRI	National Human Rights Institution
NISP	National Immunisation Support Programme
NMR	Neonatal Mortality Rate
NNS	National Nutrition Survey
OCSEA	Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OOSC	Out-of-School-Children
OOSR	Out-of-School-Rate
PAB	Protection at Birth
PBS	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
PES	Pakistan Education Statistics
PCV	Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine
PCV3	Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (Third Dose)
PCLS	Punjab Child Labour Survey
PECA	Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act
PIE	Pakistan Institute of Education
PKR	Pakistani Rupee
PMCID	PubMed Central Identifier
PMDU	Pakistan Citizen's Portal Management and Delivery Unit
PMID	PubMed Identifier
PMWF	Pakistan Mine Workers Federation
PMYP	Prime Minister's Youth Programme
PPC	Pakistan Penal Code
PTR	Pupil-Teacher Ratio
PVC	Provincial Vigilance Committee
RHCs	Rural Health Centres
SAFRON	Ministry of States and Frontier Regions

SCPA	Sindh Child Protection Authority
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SDPI	Sustainable Development Policy Institute
SHRC	Sindh Human Rights Commission
SOGA	State of Global Air
SOS	Save Our Souls (Children's Villages)
SPARC	Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections
TB	Tuberculosis
Tevta	Technical Education & Vocational Training Authority
THQs	Tehsil Headquarters Hospitals
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
TVPA	Trafficking Victims Protection Act
U5MR	Under-5 Mortality Rate
UASC	Unaccompanied or Separated Children
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNTOC	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VAC	Violence against Children
WASH	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization





# Message from the Chairperson



The State of Children in Pakistan Report 2024 presents a clear and evidence-based picture of the situation of children across the country. It brings together data from a range of national and international sources to assess how Pakistan is meeting its obligations towards children under the Constitution and international treaties, especially the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The findings are both timely and critical, highlighting where progress has been made and where significant challenges remain.

More than 40% of Pakistan's population is under the age of 18 - a staggering 112 million children. This demographic reality represents not only our greatest opportunity, but also our gravest responsibility. Yet too many children continue to be denied the basic rights essential for a life of dignity, opportunity and protection. Millions of them do not go to school. One in two children under the age of five is still affected by malnutrition. Severe forms of violence, including corporal punishment and sexual abuse of children, continue to occur at home, in schools and online spaces. For children with disabilities, transgender children and children of minority communities, the barriers to inclusion and safety are often even greater.

The findings of this report are based on extensive evidence and a child rights-based framework. They highlight both promising progress and persistent gaps. In education,

for instance, while there are initiatives to expand access to education and accelerate learning, over 26 million children aged 5 to 16 are still out of school, and less than half of 5th grade students can read or perform basic arithmetic. In health, despite progress in immunization, high mortality rates among newborns and children under five reflect critical gaps in maternal and child health care. In the area of child protection, alarming rates of violent discipline and the continued prevalence of child marriage highlight the deep-rooted cultural and legal challenges we must confront. Importantly, the report also identifies practical recommendations for change. These include strengthening early childhood development, investing in basic education and nutrition, strengthening Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS), expanding child protection services and ensuring that legal reforms are complemented by effective enforcement and awareness raising initiatives. Children's voices and meaningful participation must remain central to these efforts, particularly as we strive to create inclusive systems that reflect the realities of every child in Pakistan.

As the Chairperson of the National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC), I reaffirm our commitment to working in partnership with government institutions, civil society and development partners, policymakers, parents, teachers and community to act on the findings and

recommendations of this report and drive meaningful change for children across Pakistan. The NCRC acknowledges the support of UNICEF Pakistan, the Government of the United Kingdom, and their Awaz II programme in making this report possible. We also extend appreciation to Mr. Qindeel Shujaat for compiling the report, and to the dedicated team at NCRC for their hard work.

The State of Children in Pakistan 2024 is the first-ever report of its kind published by the NCRC. It draws on data collected through a comprehensive exercise conducted in collaboration with provincial and federal departments. While the data may not be perfect, it represents an ongoing and evolving effort to capture the realities faced by children across Pakistan. This report will be widely disseminated and is intended to serve as a

advocacy tool for policymakers, academics, researchers, and all those working to advance the rights and well-being of children.

Let this report serve as a mirror and a guide. We must see this document not merely as a stocktaking exercise, but also as a basis for measuring and accelerating progress in the years to come.



Ayesha Raza Farooq

Chairperson

National Commission on the Rights of Child  
(NCRC)

# Introduction to The State of Children in Pakistan 2024

The State of Children in Pakistan 2024 report has been prepared in compliance with Sections 15 and 17 of the National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC) Act, 2017, providing an evidence-based assessment of the status of children across the country. As part of its statutory mandate to monitor and report on progress in realising children's rights, the NCRC has developed this report using disaggregated data and analytical evidence to evaluate Pakistan's compliance with national legal frameworks and international obligations, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The scope and thematic priorities of the report were identified in line with the NCRC's Strategic Plan 2023-26, ensuring alignment with its mandate and national child rights agenda. Structured around systemic factors affecting children's rights and well-being, the report begins with a child-centred demographic and socio-economic profile of Pakistan. The report discusses Pakistan's international obligations and Pakistan's engagement with international human rights mechanisms and frameworks. On this basis, the report adopts a thematic approach and examines children's rights across the four core pillars of the UNCRC: development, survival, protection, and participation. Each section examines emerging trends, legal frameworks, institutional responses, and disparities. The report also seeks to draw attention to emerging issues such as climate-related vulnerabilities, child online protection and the situation of marginalised groups. The report concludes each thematic area with targeted recommendations for policymakers, civil society organisations, and development partners to inform the design of responsive and effective child-focused policies and programmes in Pakistan.

A multi-stage, evidence-based methodology was employed, combining a comprehensive literature review, secondary data analysis, and stakeholder engagement. The literature review examined existing laws, policies, administrative records, and national and provincial datasets relevant to children's rights in Pakistan. Based on this research, analytical tools and data templates were developed and shared with federal and provincial duty bearers to promote consistency and inclusivity in data collection. These templates specifically requested disaggregated data by gender, disability status, and minority identity in order to identify disparities affecting marginalised children. Additionally, meetings and consultations with key stakeholders provided supplementary insights and validation of findings.

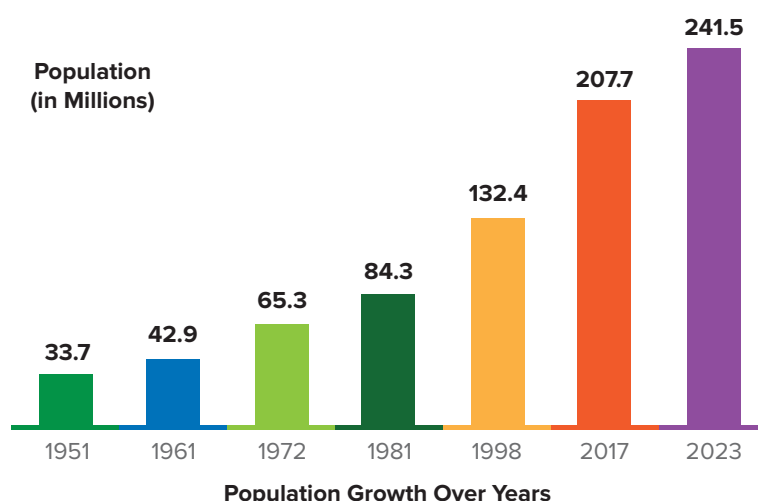
Recognising the importance of up-to-date and context-specific information, the NCRC placed primary reliance on collecting data directly from duty bearers, rather than depending solely on secondary sources. Where responses were limited or unavailable, secondary data and existing research were used to fill gaps, support analysis, and validate findings. The draft report was also reviewed by technical experts to ensure accuracy, relevance, and alignment with the report's objectives.

The NCRC encountered several challenges in data collection. This was likely due, in part, to the fact that relevant departments across provinces monitor and compile data using different systems and indicators. In many cases, existing data frameworks do not adequately capture the identities and specific needs of marginalised children, including transgender children, children with disabilities, and those from minority groups. Even where data was provided, it was often incomplete, lacked disaggregation, or was not submitted using the standard templates shared by the NCRC. The overall response process was also delayed, requiring repeated follow-ups. These challenges highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms in data collection, standardisation, and coordination across all relevant sectors and jurisdictions.

As the first national assessment of children's rights led by the NCRC, this report represents a critical milestone in institutionalising evidence-based monitoring and accountability in Pakistan. It also provides a baseline to track progress over time. Beyond its role as a diagnostic tool, the report serves as a strategic platform for advocacy, policy reform, and targeted action to advance the rights of every child in Pakistan.

# Pakistan's Profile

Pakistan, a federal parliamentary republic, is the fifth most populous country in the world with 241 million inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> This is a substantial increase from the 2017 population of 207 million, representing an annual growth rate of approximately 2.55%. The majority of the population is Muslim (96.4%), followed by Hindus (1.6%) and Christians (1.4%), with smaller communities of other faiths.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 3% of Pakistan's population is reported to be living with a disability, according to the Census 2023.<sup>3</sup>



Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Announcement of results of 7th Population and Housing Census-2023 'The Digital Census' | Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (n.d.). <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/announcement-results-7th-population-and-housing-census-2023-digital-census>








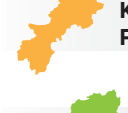

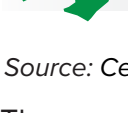
<sup>2</sup>Announcement of results of 7th Population and Housing Census-2023 'The Digital Census' | Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (n.d.). <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/announcement-results-7th-population-and-housing-census-2023-digital-census>

<sup>3</sup>Note: While this figure reflects official government estimates from Census, it is important to acknowledge that it is significantly lower than the global average. Many experts consider disability prevalence in Pakistan to be under-reported, suggesting that the actual percentage may be considerably higher due to under-diagnosis, stigma, and data collection challenges.

<sup>4</sup>7th Population & Housing Census: Key Findings Report. (n.d.). Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/Key\\_Findings\\_Report.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/Key_Findings_Report.pdf)

## 1.1 Children's Population

The country has a large youth demographic, with 47% of its population under the age of 18, comprising 51.6% male and 48.3% female. Half of Pakistan's children population reside in Punjab province.

Population under 18	 Total %		 Male	 Female	 Transgender
	Total	%	Male	Female	Transgender
 Pakistan	112,472,700	100	58,099,978	54,370,121	2,601
 Punjab	56,320,353	50	28,853,198	27,465,596	1,559
 Sindh	26,710,708	24	13,922,057	12,788,106	545
 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	20,321,058	18	10,502,857	9,817,981	220
 Balochistan	8,247,599	7	4,361,822	3,885,515	262
 ICT	872,982	0.8	460,044	412,923	15

Source: Census 2023

The youngest age group, 0-4 years (under 5 years), has the highest population among the different age groups of children in Pakistan. The high number of children in this age group contributes to problems such as malnutrition, hinders early childhood development and increasing child poverty, and puts immense pressure on the country's health, education and social infrastructure.

Age Group	0-04	05-09	10-14	15-17 (under 18)
	36,471,421	32,272,136	28,790,182	14,938,961
	32.42%	28.69%	25.59%	13.28%

Source: Census 2023

## 1.2 Child Rights Governance

Pakistan's governance operates under a federal structure, with power divided among the federal government, four provincial governments (Punjab, Sindh, KP, and Balochistan), and autonomous regions (Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir).<sup>5</sup> Federal and Provincial Responsibilities in Pakistan are defined under the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, establishing a division of powers to enable both national unity and regional autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Government of Pakistan. Pakistan's federal structure and governance. Retrieved from <https://www.pakistan.gov.pk>

<sup>6</sup>Government of Pakistan. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://www.pakistan.gov.pk>

The 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment in 2010 fundamentally reshaped governance in Pakistan, particularly in the domain of child rights, by devolving legislative powers from the federal government to the provinces. This devolution abolished the Concurrent Legislative List, transferring authority over key areas such as education, health, labour, and social welfare to the provinces. Criminal law, in particular, operates as a shared domain between federal and provincial governments. However, international commitments, including reporting obligations, interprovincial coordination and matters concerning federally administered territories, are the responsibility of the federal government.

In Pakistan, international laws and treaties that the country has ratified are not directly applicable or enforceable within the domestic legal system unless they are incorporated into national legislation. The Constitution of Pakistan follows a dualist approach, which means that international obligations must be translated into domestic laws through appropriate legislative measures before they can be legally binding.

### 1.3 Social Determinants and their Impact on Children

The social determinants shed light on various indicators such as education, health, income and gender equality, which determine the quality of life and human development in a society. Pakistan's social determinants paint a challenging picture especially for children.

Pakistan lags behind its regional counterparts in almost all social determinants for example it has an adult literacy rate<sup>7</sup> of just 58%.<sup>8</sup> Countries like Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh have achieved much higher literacy levels, while Pakistan surpasses only Afghanistan in South Asia.<sup>9</sup> Low literacy rates hinder socio-economic development, perpetuate poverty and limit opportunities for individual and national progress. According to the World Bank, 77% of children in Pakistan are classified as "learning poor," meaning they are unable to read and comprehend a simple text by age 10.<sup>10</sup> This rate is approximately 19 percentage points worse than the average for lower- and middle-income countries.

#### Literacy Rates (Adult Literacy %)



Source: PES 2022-23

Pakistan ranks 164th globally in the Human Development Index (HDI) with a value of 0.540, categorising it among countries with low human development.<sup>11</sup> The Inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI) for Pakistan is 0.360,<sup>12</sup> reveals a 33% loss in potential development due to disparities in health, education, and income. Gender inequality is a serious issue in Pakistan, as reflected in Pakistan's Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.834.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Literacy rates refer to the percentage of the population, aged 15 and above, who can read and write with understanding in any language.

<sup>8</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE). (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. <https://pie.gov.pk/Publications>

<sup>9</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE). (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23.

<sup>10</sup>World Bank. (2024). Learning poverty in Pakistan. World Bank. <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/dataviz/girls-education-pakistan/>

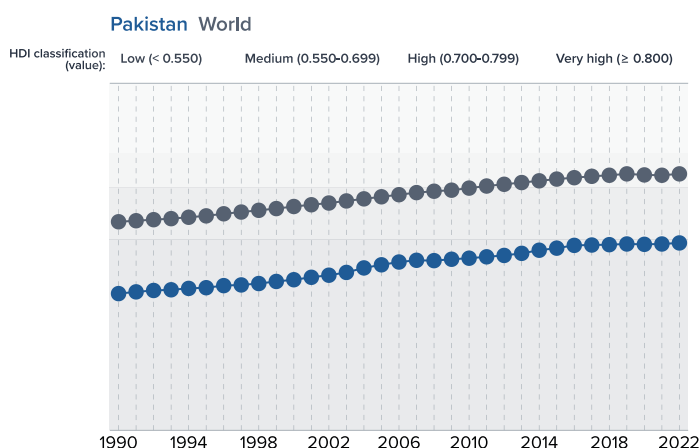
<sup>11</sup>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). Human Development Report 2023-2024: Breaking the gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world.

<sup>12</sup>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). Human Development Report 2023-2024: Breaking the gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world.

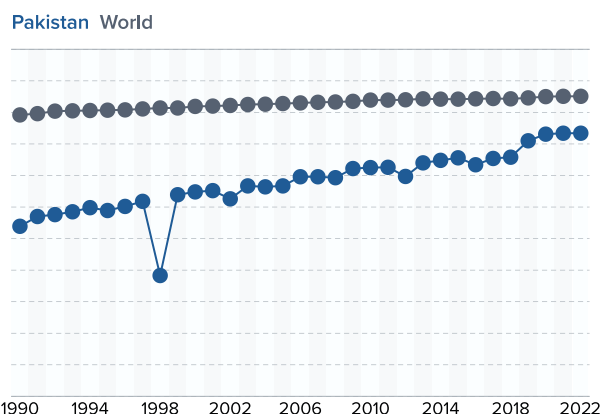
<sup>13</sup>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023). Human Development Report 2023-2024: Breaking the gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world.



## HDI in comparison 1990 – 2022



## GDI in comparison 1990 – 2022



Source: UNDP

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) scores of 0.198 reveal severe deprivations in Pakistan across health, education, and living standards, while 40.5% of the population lives below the poverty line according to World Bank.<sup>14</sup> The report also suggests that children in low-income households bear the brunt of malnutrition, school dropouts, and preventable diseases—a consequence of broader structural challenges such as inequitable resource distribution, weak governance, and underinvestment in social sectors.

Economic growth in 2024 remained modest at 2.5%, with inflation averaging 23.4%, eroding real incomes. High public debt at 72.4% of GDP<sup>15</sup> constrains spending on essential services like health, education and social protection, perpetuating poor infrastructure and underfunded education and healthcare systems.

The labour force is estimated at approximately 75 million, comprising mostly young people, with an unemployment rate of 6.9%.<sup>16</sup> Female labour force participation remains alarmingly low, limiting household income and resources available for children's development. Job creation has also not kept pace with population growth, further burdening families and increasing reliance on child labour to supplement income.

### The Case for Investment in Children

High population growth is a significant strain on Pakistan's limited resources and economic stability and highlights the urgent need to prioritise investment in children. Without expanding public spending on health, education and child protection, the future holds limited opportunities for children and Pakistan risks perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequality. Investment is critical for managing population pressures by expanding access to family planning and reproductive health services, but more importantly, for fostering a healthier, better-educated generation equipped to lead their communities and drive sustainable development. Strong investments in children's health, nutrition, education, and social protection are fundamental to building future leaders, enhancing Pakistan's role in the global community, and securing long-term national prosperity.

<sup>14</sup>World Bank report shows increase in Pakistan's poverty rate | Dialogue Pakistan. (n.d.-b). DialoguePakistan. <https://dialoguepakistan.com/en/business/world-bank-reports-shows-increase-in-pakistan-s-poverty-rate>

<sup>15</sup>Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Finance. (2024). Economic Survey of Pakistan 2023-2024. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan.

<sup>16</sup>Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Finance. (2024). Economic Survey of Pakistan 2023-2024. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan.



## 2. Pakistan's International Commitments: Human Rights of Children

Human rights are the fundamental freedoms and protections to which every human being is entitled to regardless of gender, nationality, ethnicity or any other status. These rights encompass civil, political, economic, social and cultural dimensions and ensure that all people, including children, can live with dignity, equality and justice. Children, as a particularly vulnerable group, have special rights under international law aimed at protecting their well-being, development and safety. These international laws and treaties set standards to which any signatory country including Pakistan is obliged to uphold and form the basis for its national policies, laws and practices to promote the human rights of children within its territory.

Pakistan has ratified several key UN human rights treaties that provide a broad framework for the protection of children's rights (See Table 1). Among these, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989 stands out as a core treaty that addresses various aspects of children's rights holistically. Pakistan ratified the UNCRC on 12 November 1990 and has also ratified two of its optional protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

Pakistan has not ratified any treaties or protocols that allow for individual complaints, including the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on a Communications Procedure and similar mechanisms under the CRPD, CAT, ICCPR and CEDAW. Additionally, Pakistan has not accepted inquiry procedures under key UN human rights treaties. If accepted, these mechanisms could play an important role in strengthening accountability and advancing the protection of human rights.

In addition to its treaty obligations, Pakistan is also part of a broader international framework that is consistent with its human rights commitments. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in September 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, include several goals that are directly linked to children's rights, as ensuring quality education (SDG 4), eliminating child labour in all its forms (SDG 8.7), eradicating harmful practices (SDG 5.3), and ending all forms of malnutrition (SDG 2.2). Pakistan also benefits from the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), a trade arrangement with the European Union that grants preferential access to EU markets. In return, Pakistan commits to implementation of 27 international conventions on human rights, labour rights, environmental standards and good governance.<sup>17</sup> These include key frameworks such as the UNCRC, ILO Conventions, and other international agreements aimed at promoting sustainable development and social progress. Pakistan was first awarded GSP+ status on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014, and the current GSP+ scheme has been extended until 31<sup>st</sup> December, 2027 allowing Pakistan to continue enjoying trade benefits.

<sup>17</sup>Monitoring missions and priorities in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://gsphub.eu/country-info/Pakistan>



## 2.1 Compliance with UN Treaties

The international compliance process for State Party reports and UN Committee observations involves several key steps. First, the government must submit periodic reports to the relevant UN treaty bodies outlining its compliance with international obligations. These reports are typically submitted every four to five years, depending on the specific treaty. These reports are reviewed by the relevant committees, which also engage in dialogues with state representatives and consider inputs from civil society organisations. The reviews are then followed by concluding observations that the committees' issue, which highlight areas of concern and make recommendations to the country for improvement. The government is then expected to implement these recommendations and submit follow-up periodic reports to demonstrate progress.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, compliance with ILO reporting mechanisms requires States to periodically submit progress reports on the implementation of ratified labour standards, including standards for engaging children in labour. These reports are reviewed by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR).

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a unique process within the UN Human Rights Council that reviews the human rights records of all UN member states every four to five years. It is a peer-driven mechanism in which member states review and assess each other's performance and compliance with agreed standards, rather than being assessed by an external body.

In 2023 and 2024 Pakistan continued to participate in international human rights mechanisms and processes, including:

### **Fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Pakistan (January 2023)**

Pakistan underwent its fourth UPR by the Human Rights Council in January 2023, during the UPR Working Group's 42nd session.<sup>19</sup> Pakistan received a total of 340 recommendations, of which it supported 253 and noted 87.<sup>20</sup> Among the recommendations, several focused specifically on children's rights. Some of the key recommendations related to children concerned the issue of child labour and urged Pakistan to strengthen its efforts to eliminate child labour, especially in hazardous industries, and ensure strict enforcement of existing laws. Member states emphasised the need to improve access to quality education for all children, particularly addressing gender and socio-economic inequalities. Concerns were also raised about child marriage and calls were made to strengthen preventative measures, enforce minimum age laws and raise awareness of the harmful effects of early marriage. Violence against children, including corporal punishment and abuse, was another key focus. Improving the health and nutrition outcomes for children was also emphasised, particularly tackling malnutrition and ensuring improved access to healthcare services.

### **Sixth and Seventh Periodic reports submitted by Pakistan on UNCRC (August 2023)**

Pakistan submitted its combined sixth and seventh periodic report on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2023, with the report becoming publicly available in 2024.<sup>21</sup> Originally due in 2021, the government's submission was delayed by two years. The report covers the period from June 2016 to June 2021 and

<sup>18</sup>United Nations. (n.d.). Reporting to the treaty bodies: Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/reporting-treaty-bodies>

<sup>19</sup>Universal Periodic Review - Pakistan. (n.d.). UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/pk-index>

<sup>20</sup>"Supported" means the country agrees with the recommendation and commits to take action. "Noted" means the country does not commit to implementing the recommendation but acknowledges that it was made.

<sup>21</sup>UN Treaties Compliance – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/un-treaties-compliance/>

provides a comprehensive review of Pakistan's progress on child rights, highlighting legislative and policy reforms, and programmatic measures aimed at child protection, education, health, and welfare.

*The NCRC has submitted feedback in response to the Committee on the Rights of the Child's (CRC) request for additional information on Pakistan.*

*The final report to the CRC is currently being prepared by the Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR). The Government of Pakistan is scheduled to meet with the Committee in May 2025, and the Concluding Observations will be shared shortly afterward.*

### **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) – List of Issues (March 2024)**

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights issued a “List of Issues” regarding Pakistan's compliance with the ICESCR in March 2024.<sup>22</sup> The focus was on the rights to education, health, and an adequate standard of living. Pakistan is expected to provide response on how ICESCR rights are being incorporated into its legislative and policy frameworks, the independence of the judiciary, and the training of law enforcement officials on the Covenant provisions. The Committee also requested updates on coordination mechanisms between federal and provincial authorities to ensure equitable access to these rights, particularly in areas such as employment, social security, housing, and healthcare. The list includes issues such as birth registration, child labour, access to education, especially for girls, school infrastructure, harassment of minority students, the burden of childhood diseases, mental health services, measures for disadvantaged children and the protection of Afghan refugee children.

The Committee's review of Pakistan is scheduled to take place from February 9, 2026, to March 6, 2026.

### **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) – List of Issues (March 2024)**

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities issued a “List of Issues” on Pakistan's initial report on the implementation of the CRPD. On the issues raised in relation to children with disabilities, the Committee requested updates on revising child policies for children with disabilities and concrete plans to make them inclusive. It also sought information on the steps taken to establish mechanisms that protect their best interests, enable their participation and safeguard them from domestic violence. The Committee has also asked for details on inclusive education policies, the provision of support to meet the needs of students with disabilities and accessibility of disabled children to vocational and higher education. Pakistan was also asked to report on the measures employed to ensure disability-friendly healthcare facilities, ease of birth registration and provision of support for families with children with disabilities, as well as Pakistan's plans to de-institutionalise children with disabilities and promote community-based care for those in need of alternative care.

### **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – Concluding Observations (November 2024)**

The Human Rights Committee reviewed Pakistan's second periodic report under the ICCPR and issued Concluding Observations in November 2024.<sup>23</sup> While commending some legislative measures taken such as the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 the Committee raised concerns over discrimination, restrictions on religious freedom, and limitations on freedom of expression by the state. The Committee recommended improvement of the protection of

<sup>22</sup>UN Treaties Compliance – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/un-treaties-compliance/>

<sup>23</sup>UN Treaties Compliance – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/un-treaties-compliance/>

minority groups, strengthening the independence of the judiciary and ensuring that the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) is adequately resourced to investigate human rights violations. The Committee urged Pakistan to implement further reforms to better fulfil its obligations under the ICCPR.

**Observation (CEACR) – Adopted 2023, Published at the 112th ILC Session (2024) on Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)**

The CEACR Committee's observations on the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) highlighted several critical issues relating to child labour and employment regulations.<sup>24</sup> The Committee took note of the observations of the All-Pakistan Federation of Trade Unions (APFTU) submitted on 31 August 2023 and called for a response from the Government, stressing the need for stakeholder participation in policy formulation. The Committee appreciated the passage of the Balochistan Employment of Children (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 2021, which prohibits employment of children below 14 years of age and bans hazardous labour for all children below 18 years of age. The Committee also noted the ongoing efforts of the ICT administration, supported by the ILO, to amend the Employment of Children Act, 1991 and introduce a minimum employment age of 14 years. The Committee also commended the initiatives in Punjab and Sindh to consolidate labour laws into comprehensive labour codes, acknowledging efforts to strengthen regulatory frameworks and labour protections.

**Observation (CEACR) – Adopted 2023, Published at the 112th ILC Session (2024) on Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)**

The CEACR Committee's observations on the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) highlighted key gaps in legislation and implementation.<sup>25</sup> Observations submitted by the APFTU and the Pakistan Mine Workers Federation (PMWF) raised concerns about legislative enforcement and implementation gaps addressing the worst forms of child labour. The Committee emphasised the importance of District and Provincial Vigilance Committees (DVCs and PVCs) in enforcing bonded labour laws, facilitating victim rehabilitation, and assisting local administrations. It commended the adoption of the Balochistan Forced and Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 2021, and the formulation of relevant rules under the act. Additionally, the Committee noted ongoing monitoring efforts through the Provincial and District Anti-Human Trafficking and Anti-Bonded Labour Monitoring Committees in Balochistan and the establishment of DVCs in KP. With no reports of bonded labour in KP in 2022, the Committee highlighted the effectiveness of these mechanisms and urged their expansion to ensure comprehensive enforcement and protection for vulnerable populations in Pakistan.

## 2.2 Conclusion

NCRC notes that there have been persistent delays in submitting periodic reports by the Government of Pakistan, including the practice of combining several overdue reports. While the government tracks progress in fulfilling its treaty obligations through designated ministries and treaty implementation cells, delays weaken the effectiveness of these mechanisms and hinder timely engagement with treaty bodies and implementation of recommendations. Equally important is the dissemination of Concluding Observations which is carried out through government agencies and civil society; however, gaps in systematic follow-up and enforcement.

<sup>24</sup>Compliance of ILO Conventions by Pakistan – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/compliance-of-ilo-conventions-by-pakistan/>

<sup>25</sup>Compliance of ILO Conventions by Pakistan – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/compliance-of-ilo-conventions-by-pakistan/ibid>.

To strengthen accountability, the government must institutionalise and prioritise timely reporting, enhance coordination and establish monitoring mechanisms to track and implement the recommendations.

The treaty bodies' observations and recommendations provide a framework for Pakistan to address gaps in policy, legislation and implementation, particularly in relation to children's rights and related issues. Aligning national and provincial laws and policies with international standards is crucial for Pakistan to fulfil its international obligations and commitments, but more importantly, such legislative harmonisation will also help improve the situation of protection rights for children in the country and the realisation to uphold their rights in all aspects by the Government.

**Table 1: UN Treaties Ratified by Pakistan on Children's Rights**

Instrument	Ratification by Pakistan
International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination	21 Sep 1966
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	12 Nov 1990
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	12 Mar 1996
ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)	11 Oct 2001
ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)	06 Jul 2006
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	17 Apr 2008
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	23 Jun 2010
Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment	23 Jun 2010
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	05 Jul 2011
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography	05 Jul 2011
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict	17 Nov 2016

Source: OHCHR Treaty Body Database



## 3.Children's Right to Development









The right to development is a foundational principle that guarantees every child the opportunity to realise their full potential including physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural development. Article 6 of the UNCRC obliges States to support the holistic development of children. *This chapter examines the right to development through the lens of education, emphasising critical elements such as access, quality, learning outcomes, equity, financing, and the indispensable role of play in nurturing a child's overall growth.*

### 3.1 Access to Education and Participation

#### Education System and Student Enrolments

Pakistan's education system includes various stages: pre-primary, primary, middle, high, and higher secondary, collectively forming elementary and secondary education. Beyond these, post-secondary education includes colleges, technical, and tertiary institutions. Education is delivered by a variety of providers, including public and private sectors, civil society organisations (CSOs), religious institutions (madrassas), and non-formal education programmes. In the 2022–23 academic year, the system comprised 349,909 institutions (including universities) and a teacher workforce of 2.57 million, serving over 56 million students.<sup>26</sup>

#### Enrolment by Gender (%) in Pakistan (PES 2022-23)

	 Total	 Boys (%)	 Girls (%)
 ICT	634,678	50.49	49.51
 Balochistan	1,513,342	59.89	40.11
 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	8,970,541	59.67	40.33
 Punjab	23,750,702	50.71	49.29
 Sindh	9,299,480	57.44	42.56

Source: PES 2022-23

<sup>26</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

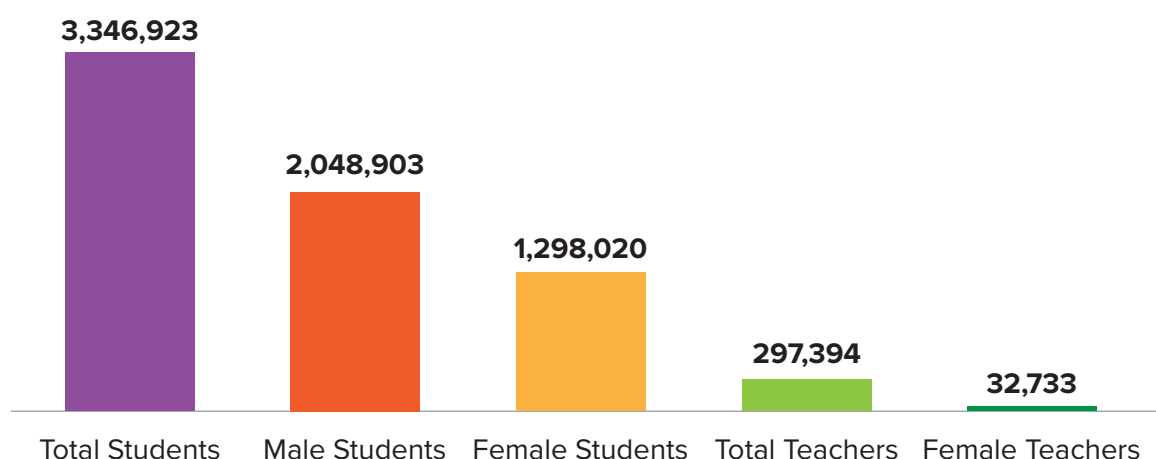
Pakistan has a total enrolment of 45.67 million students in 2022-23 from pre-primary to higher education, of which 54% are boys and 46% are girls.<sup>27</sup> While gender parity is nearly maintained at early education levels (54% boys, 46% girls from pre-primary to middle school), the gap widens slightly in higher grades—56% boys vs. 44% girls in high school and 53% vs. 47%). The majority of students, 61%, are enrolled in rural areas. However, enrolment rates are higher in urban areas at higher secondary and degree college levels. In Pakistan, more than half of all students are enrolled in the Punjab province.

Levels	ICT	Balochistan	KP	Punjab	Sindh
Total	634,678	1,513,342	8,970,541	23,750,702	9,299,480
Pre-Primary	17.73	17.95	21.29	20.98	21.49
Primary	39.55	52.69	45.68	45.08	45.00
Middle	20.65	15.27	18.14	18.72	16.99
High	10.33	7.45	8.55	9.00	9.91
Higher Secondary	10.68	5.31	4.79	4.74	5.62
Degree College	1.06	1.33	1.54	1.48	1.00

Source: PES 2022-23

Deeni madaris or madrassas provides education to over 3.34 million students from low-income families, of whom 39% are female. The participation of female teachers in these institutions remains low at 11%.<sup>28</sup> Despite their widespread presence, many madrassas operate outside the formal education system and mostly focus on religious subjects, with limited integration of contemporary academic disciplines. This restricts students' access to a broader curriculum and affects their prospects for higher education and diverse career opportunities.

#### Enrolment and Staffing in Deeni Madaris



Source: PES 2022-23

<sup>27</sup>This includes AJK and GB also

<sup>28</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.



Recent legislative reforms, notably the Societies Registration (Amendment) Act passed in December 2024, aim to enhance the oversight and registration of madrassa and promote a more harmonised curriculum. While these reforms signal a shift toward curricular diversification and greater accountability, their impact is yet to be seen, given the early stage of implementation. Ensuring that madrassas can serve as bridges to broader educational and economic opportunities will require policy coherence and sustained engagement with community leaders and religious authorities.

Non-Formal Education (NFE) employs flexible models and complements formal education by targeting out-of-school children (OOSC) and adults through 31,522 centres and enrolling over 1 million learners, 57% of whom are girls. Regional disparities persist in NFE sector, with Sindh and Balochistan reporting lower participation rates, while Punjab accounts for 57% of the total enrolments in the country.

However, given the enormous number of 26 million OOSC, the current scale of NFE is not sufficient to close the education gap.<sup>29</sup> Systemic challenges continue to limit the scalability and effectiveness of NFE. Standardisation remains a key concern, as only 40% of NFE centres align with provincial curricula, thus restricting opportunities for transition into formal education streams.<sup>30</sup> Funding shortfalls further constrain quality, with NFE receiving only 2.3% of total education budgets, resulting in a shortage of trained facilitators, learning materials, and assessment tools.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, there are emerging success stories. UNICEF, in collaboration with provincial non-formal education departments, has developed a comprehensive Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP), aligned with provincial curricula and incorporating teacher training, textbooks, assessments, and accreditation mechanisms. As of 2024, over 93,986 children - including 52,378 girls — were enrolled under this initiative, which operates at both primary and middle levels to provide alternative pathways to learning. Punjab's *Taleem Ghar* initiative (2020–23) similarly transitioned 68% of graduates into formal schooling.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the *Advancing Quality Alternative Learning (AQAL)* project has also improved foundational learning outcomes by promoting culturally relevant curricula, enhanced teacher support, and community engagement mechanisms.<sup>33</sup>

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions offer skill-building opportunities, with 453,957 students enrolled across 4,406 institutions (1,644 public and 2,762 private), of whom 33% are female.<sup>34</sup> TVET is ideally suited for older children and youth who cannot be mainstreamed into formal schooling, providing them with practical skills and training that enable decent earning opportunities and better integration into the workforce. Despite its potential, Pakistan's TVET sector struggles with limited access for OOSC, outdated curricula, weak industry ties, gender gaps, underfunding, and societal perceptions that undervalue vocational education.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

<sup>30</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education. (2024). Non-formal education quality assessment report. Government of Pakistan. <https://www.pie.gov.pk/reports>

<sup>31</sup>Centre for Peace & Development Initiatives. (2023). Education budget analysis: Non-formal education in Pakistan (Report No. 17). <https://www.cpd-pakistan.org>

<sup>32</sup>UNICEF Pakistan. (2023). Taleem Ghar initiative: Transition outcomes in Punjab [Case study]. <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/reports>

<sup>33</sup>Japan International Cooperation Agency. (2024). Joint Mid-term Review Report for the Advancing Quality Alternative Learning Project Phase 2 (AQAL2) in Islamic Republic of Pakistan. <https://openjicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/1000051753.pdf>

<sup>34</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

<sup>35</sup>Khan, A., & Ali, M. (2023). Who demands technical and vocational education in Pakistan? A socio-economic analysis. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 43(2), 251–270.

Public and Private Schools

Pakistan's education system is witnessing a steady decline in the share of public sector institutions, raising concerns about the state's diminishing role in ensuring universal education. The number of public institutions has dropped from 56% in 2021-22 to 53% in 2022-23, while the private sector has expanded to accommodate nearly half (46%) of student enrolments.<sup>36</sup> The teaching workforce is now predominantly concentrated in private institutions (61%), further indicating a shift towards private education.

Table 3: Percentage of Institutions, Enrolment, and Teachers by Sector				
Category	2021-22		2022-23	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
Teachers	42	58	39	61
Enrolment	54	46	54	46
Institutions	56	44	53	47

Source: PES 2022-23

Public schools remain overwhelmingly focused on primary education (77%), with a sharp decline in availability at the middle (11%), high (10%), and higher secondary (2%) levels. This restricts pathways for students seeking higher education in government schools, leaving many with no choice but to turn to private institutions. While the private sector has stepped in to fill these gaps, particularly in urban areas, its rapid expansion raises concerns about affordability, equity, and quality control. Many low-cost private schools operate with untrained teachers, inadequate infrastructure, and weak regulation, making the assumption of consistently superior education questionable. Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a viable strategy adopted by various provinces to expand educational access and improve quality; however, their long-term sustainability remains a concern.

Intake and Enrolment Indicators in Pakistan

The Gross Intake Ratio (GIR), Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), and Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) highlight major challenges in access to education in Pakistan. The GIR for primary education is 91% (97% for males and 84% for females), reflects gender disparities that persist throughout the education system.<sup>37</sup> Progression and retention remain problematic, with only 68% of students reaching the last grade of primary and 49% completing middle school. GERs decline from 78% at the primary level to 22% at higher secondary, while NERs mirror this trend.<sup>38</sup> At the primary level, the NER is 64.6%, improving slightly to 71.5% at middle school but dropping sharply to 58.7% in high school and 40.9% at higher secondary.

<sup>36</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.  
<sup>37</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.  
<sup>38</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

**Table 4: Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) % - 2022-23**

Level	Total	Male	Female
Pre-Primary	76.30	82.50	69.80
Primary Classes: 1-5	77.90	83.10	72.30
Middle Classes: 6-8	53.70	55.90	51.30
High Classes: 9-10	42.80	45.00	40.50
Higher Secondary Classes: 11-12	22.00	22.40	21.60

Source: PES 2022-23

**Table 5: Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) % - 2022-23**

Classes	Total	Male	Female
Primary Classes: 1-5	64.60	67.90	61.20
Middle Classes: 6-8	71.50	76.70	66.00
High Classes: 9-10	58.70	59.80	57.50
Higher Secondary Classes: 11-12	40.90	43.40	38.20

Source: PES 2022-23

Provincial trends reveal disparities in access and retention. The ICT consistently outperforms other regions, with the highest GIR (137% at primary) and GER (74% at higher secondary).<sup>39</sup> Punjab also exceeds the national average across most indicators. Conversely, Balochistan faces serious challenges, with the lowest GIR (43%) at primary level and GER (12%) at higher secondary level. The gender gap is most pronounced in Balochistan and Sindh, where female enrolment lags behind male enrolment at all levels. These disparities reflect structural inequities beyond population distribution. ICT and Punjab's relative advantage stems from higher urbanisation, better road connectivity to schools and historically prioritised education spending.

Pakistan has a national average of 63% overage children in primary school and 65% in middle school.<sup>40</sup> It means delayed school entry or grade repetition, and requires attention from education planners, as high rates of overage children can impact learning outcomes and academic achievement. Balochistan reports the highest percentages (71% in primary and 81% in middle school) overage children, while ICT has the lowest (55% in primary and 52% in middle school).

### School Attendance Rates

School attendance rates vary among children aged 5-17 across provinces. In Punjab, 80.7% boys and 77.7% girls attend schools, although a notable decline in attendance is observed between ages 11 and 12.<sup>41</sup> The primary reason cited for non-attendance is lack of interest, particularly among older children. Similarly, in KP, approximately 79.3% boys and 60.6% girls attend school, with attendance peaking at age 9 and declining thereafter.<sup>42</sup> Economic constraints, such as

<sup>39</sup> Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

<sup>40</sup> Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

<sup>41</sup> Government of the Punjab. (Oct 2022). Punjab Child Labour Survey 2019–2020: Key Findings Report. Labour & Human Resource Department.

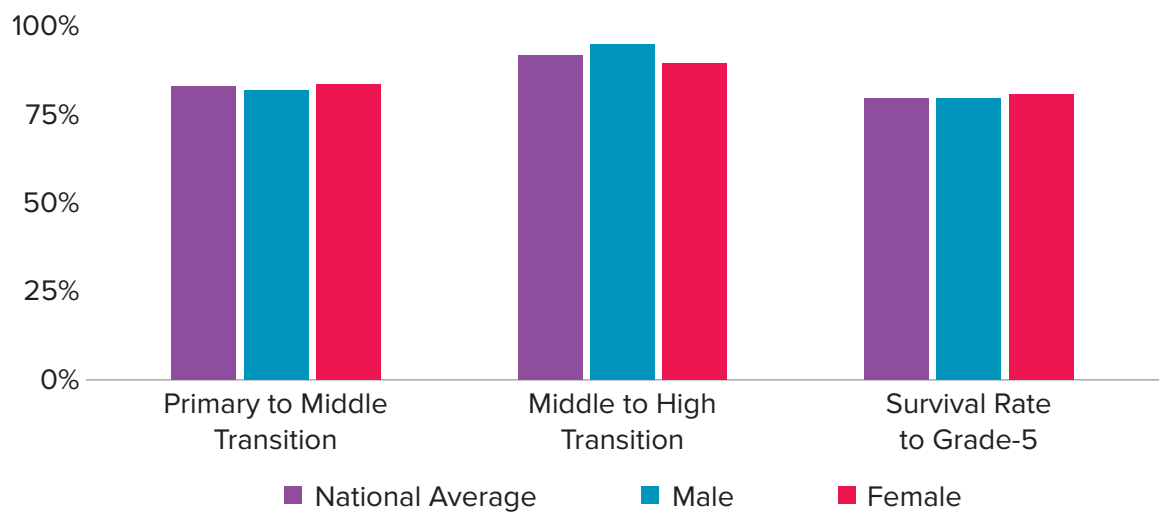
<sup>42</sup> Directorate of Labour, Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. (January 2024). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Labour Survey Report 2022.

inability to afford schooling and lack of available facilities, contribute to non-attendance, especially among older children.

Effective Transition Rates (ETR)

The Effective Transition Rate (ETR) highlights students' ability to progress between educational levels, providing insights into access, retention, and equity. Nationally, the data reflects relatively steady progression, with a strong transition from middle to high school (92%) compared to primary to middle (83%).<sup>43</sup> While gender disparities are minimal overall, they do fluctuate at specific levels, with females slightly outpacing males in primary-to-middle transitions but falling behind in middle-to-high transitions. The moderate survival rate to Grade 5 highlights the need to strengthen retention efforts at the foundational levels of education.

Effective Transition Rates in Pakistan



Source: PES 2022-23

Provincial trends highlight deep inequalities in education progression and student retention across Pakistan. While ICT leads with a 100% transition rate from primary to middle school and a 97% survival rate to Grade 5, such high retention levels remain an exception rather than the norm. Sindh shows some positive outcomes, particularly in middle-to-high school transitions and female survival rates, but the situation is far more alarming in Balochistan, which records the lowest figures across all metrics. The transition rate from primary to middle school stands at just 72-75%, transition to high school at 84%, and survival to Grade 5 at a critically low 52%.<sup>44</sup>

A closer look at gender disparities reveals even deeper challenges. The high dropout rates between primary and middle school point to structural deficiencies, primarily the unavailability of middle and secondary schools in the public sector. According to PES 2022–23, primary schools account for nearly 66% of all public schools, while middle and high schools together represent less than 30%. The wide gap between the number of primary and post-primary institutions forces students to travel long distances, discouraging many, especially girls, from continuing their education. This longstanding issue has been repeatedly documented in education research, reinforcing that access to schools beyond the primary level remains a major factor in low retention and persistent gender inequalities.

<sup>43</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

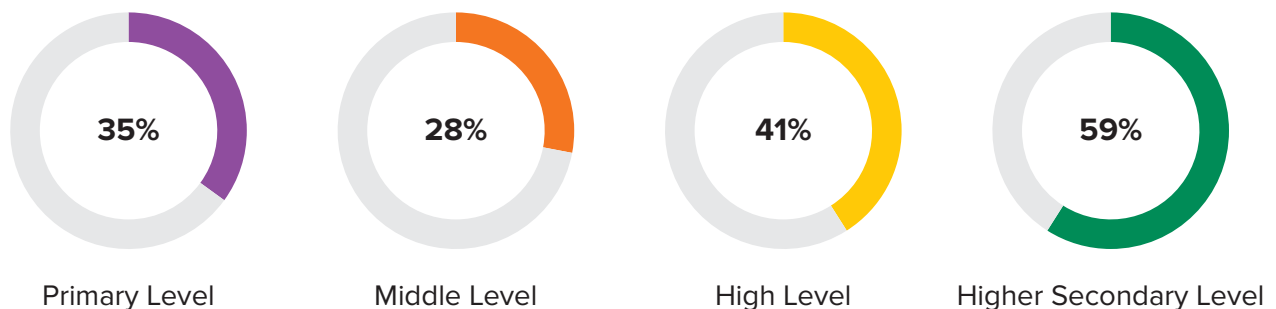
<sup>44</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan.

Once children drop out, re-entry into the education system is rarely facilitated, making dropout effectively permanent for both boys and girls. In rural areas, girls often face heightened socio-cultural constraints and the pressures of early marriage or household responsibilities, while boys are typically absorbed into agricultural labour or informal work to support household income. In both cases, the opportunity cost of returning to school increases over time, and without structured reintegration frameworks or second-chance education models, early dropout frequently marks the end of formal learning opportunities.

### Out-of-School Children

Out-of-School Children (OOSC) is a serious challenge for Pakistan's education system, with 26.089 million children aged 5-16 years currently out of school.<sup>45</sup> This represents a staggering 38% of the total school-age population. The drop-outs among girls (52%) are higher than boys. ASER 2023 reveals that 33% of the poorest girls in rural areas are out of school, compared to 19% of the richest girls.<sup>46</sup> It highlights that poverty disproportionately restricts educational access for girls. While boys are also affected, the impact is significantly higher on girls.

### Out-of-School Children in Pakistan by Education Level



Source: PES 2022-23

Among the provinces, Punjab has the highest absolute number of OOSC, with 10.96 million children OOSC and an out-of-school rate (OOSR) of 32%. Sindh follows with 7.63 million OOSC and a higher OOSR of 47.5%. While KP accounts for 3.65 million OOSC, and a relatively lower OOSR of 29.8%, Balochistan, despite having 3.13 million OOSC, exhibits a significantly higher proportion, with an OOSR of 69.1%. In contrast, the ICT has only 78,000 OOSC, corresponding to an OOSR of 13%.

A comparison of Census 2023 and PES 2022–23 data shows minor differences in the total number of OOSC nationally, but provincial discrepancies are notable, with KP showing the largest gap (4.92 million OOSC in the Census vs. 3.64 million in PES) and Punjab reporting 9.6 million in the Census, 1.36 million fewer than PES 2022-23.

### Never Attended Schools

The Census 2023 shows that out of the total OOSC in Pakistan, 79% children (36% boys, 43% girls) aged 5–16 years have never attended school. This highlights a critical problem: while dropout rates are already very high at various levels.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA). (2024). Annual Status of Education Report: ASER Pakistan 2023. Lahore

<sup>47</sup> Census 2023 data reports 25,373,350 OOSC in Pakistan, comprising 11,964,533 boys, 13,407,069 girls, and 1,402 transgender children.

Region	Total	Male	Female	Transgender
Pakistan	20,033,448	9,141,561	10,890,485	1,402
ICT	40,477	19,944	20,531	2
Balochistan	2,674,108	1,269,979	1,403,960	169
KP	4,259,321	1,686,502	2,572,716	103
Punjab	6,443,194	3,056,948	3,385,403	843
Sindh	6,616,348	3,108,188	3,507,875	285

Source: Census 2023

The absence of a systematic mechanism to report and track children who drop out hinders timely interventions, such as retention strategies through case management or addressing the underlying causes of dropouts. The fact that 79% of OOSC aged 5–16 have never attended school underscores deep-rooted structural and socio-cultural barriers to educational access. Poverty is a critical driver—according to the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement Survey, 68% of never-enrolled children belong to households in the bottom wealth quintile, where even 'free' education involves prohibitive hidden costs such as uniforms and transportation.<sup>48</sup> The perceived quality and relevance of education also significantly influence enrolment decisions; when families believe that schooling will translate into better economic opportunities, they are more likely to prioritise education. Cultural norms further constrain access; for instance, 41% of parents in KP's tribal districts view girls' education as 'non-essential'.<sup>49</sup> Governance failures compound these issues: in Sindh, only 12% of villages have functional school management committees to promote and monitor enrolment.<sup>50</sup> To overcome this challenge, targeted strategies are needed to ensure initial access to schooling, especially for marginalised population groups.

### School Closures

Prolonged school closures caused by floods, smog, heatwaves, and security challenges have deepened learning losses across the country (See Chapter "Children's Right to Survival": Climate Change and Children and Children's Right to Protection: IDPs for further discussion). The impact of such disruptions is twofold: first, learning losses accumulate over time as students face difficulties covering new content within compressed timelines. Second, these closures deepen educational inequalities, as students from privileged backgrounds benefit from access to alternative learning resources, while marginalised groups are left further behind.<sup>51</sup> Existing school infrastructure and emergency response systems remain critically inadequate to address these challenges, exposing children to both immediate disruptions and long-term educational losses. To address these challenges, it is critical to strengthen existing distance learning programmes by leveraging available technologies across the spectrum, expanding outreach to girls and vulnerable children from low-income and rural households with limited access to digital tools, and developing context-specific content tailored to diverse platforms, modalities, subjects, and grade levels.

<sup>48</sup>Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Pakistan social and living standards measurement survey (PSLM) 2022-23: Provincial report. Government of Pakistan. <https://www.pbs.gov.pk>

<sup>49</sup>Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. (2024). State of girls' education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's tribal districts. <https://www.hrcp-web.org>

<sup>50</sup>Government of Sindh. (2022). Sindh education sector plan 2021-2025: Implementation review. <https://www.sindheducation.gov.pk>

<sup>51</sup>UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.



## 3.2 Learning Environment

A conducive learning environment is required for quality education and improving student retention. Schools that offer safe, inclusive, and well-resourced environments promote greater student engagement, enhanced learning outcomes, and improved overall well-being. Such settings encourage consistent attendance and contribute to reducing dropout rates.

### Pupil-Teacher and Teacher-School Ratios

Pakistan's average pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) of 32 students per teacher reflects challenges in maintaining manageable class sizes.<sup>52</sup> Punjab faces the highest strain at the primary level, with a pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) of 42, while Sindh struggles at the higher secondary level with a PTR of 40. In contrast, KP demonstrates more favourable PTRs, especially at the middle school level. The teacher-school ratio further highlights inequities, with the ICT averaging 13 teachers per school compared to only three in Balochistan. These disparities reveal acute shortages in under-resourced provinces, notably Balochistan, where teacher recruitment and distribution require urgent attention.

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Higher Secondary</b>
Pakistan	32	38	24	28	31
ICT	33	29	31	34	40
Balochistan	21	26	18	20	22
KP	30	38	13	21	23
Punjab	36	42	30	33	37
Sindh	32	36	22	25	40

Source: PES 2022-23

The gender distribution of teachers across education levels in Pakistan shows a strong predominance of female teachers, especially at higher education levels. At the national level, female teachers constitute 54% of the workforce at the primary level, rising to 74% at the middle school level, 65% at the high school level, and 54% at the higher secondary level.<sup>53</sup> However, notable provincial disparities exist. In Balochistan and KP, male teachers continue to constitute the majority at the primary and middle levels, reflecting persistent gender gaps in the teaching workforce in these regions.

<sup>52</sup> Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan

<sup>53</sup> Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Girls' Education in Pakistan: STATISTICS & TRENDS FOR 2022-23. Islamabad

Table 8: Female Teachers in Pakistan (Pre-Primary to Higher Secondary Level)						
Teachers	Pakistan	ICT	Balochistan	KP	Punjab	Sindh
Total Teachers	1,805,166	26,768	63,790	330,999	1,000,745	382,864
Total Female (%)	63.86	84.04	41.7	43.42	73.46	58.78
Pre-Primary (%)	97.46	96.43	88.5	98.56	97.91	97.88
Primary (%)	54	93.76	36.69	39.8	71.85	37.2
Middle (%)	74	91.04	45.27	51.53	80.59	61.74
High (%)	65	85.3	40.87	43.59	69.56	70.02
Higher Secondary (%)	54	71.27	53.11	42.14	62.26	55.89

Source: PES 2022-23

### Availability to Basic Infrastructure

The availability of adequate basic infrastructure in schools is a serious issue in Pakistan, mainly at the primary level. Nationally, only 62% of primary schools have access to electricity, with Sindh (27%) and Balochistan (15%) showing alarmingly inadequate facilities.<sup>54</sup> In comparison, higher secondary schools fare much better, with 95% coverage, reflecting a prioritisation of resources for advanced education levels. Access to clean drinking water is similarly inequitable, with only 23% of primary schools in Sindh and Balochistan providing this essential facility. Toilet availability is also lacking, with 74% of primary schools equipped nationwide, but only 40% in Balochistan.<sup>55</sup> These deficits directly impact student attendance and retention, particularly for girls, who are disproportionately affected by the absence of safe and hygienic facilities.

Table 9: Availability of Basic Facilities in Public School (%) 2022-23				
Level	Electricity	Drinking Water	Toilet for Students	Boundary Wall
Primary	62	72	74	76
Middle	79	83	89	89
High	93	95	97	94
Higher Secondary	95	96	98	96
Total	67	76	78	79

Source: PES 2022-23

The deteriorating state of school infrastructure across Pakistan emerged as a critical concern in 2024, revealing systemic neglect.<sup>56</sup> Reports from Swat, Mansehra, and Shangla documented students forced to study in makeshift spaces - including rented shops, open-air settings, and structurally compromised buildings - exposing them to extreme weather conditions and fundamentally compromising educational quality. This crisis extends to urban centres, where hundreds of public secondary schools in Karachi and Punjab lack functional computer

<sup>54</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan

<sup>55</sup>Pakistan Institute of Education (2024). Pakistan Education Statistics 2022-23. Government of Pakistan

<sup>56</sup>Education – the state of children in Pakistan. (n.d.) <https://stateofchildren.com/category/child-rights/education-child-rights/>



laboratories. Particularly alarming are cases like Rahim Yar Khan, where hazardous school buildings remained unaddressed for months despite official safety warnings.

Beyond basic amenities, schools urgently require climate-resilient infrastructure to withstand disasters. Global models such as UNICEF's Climate-Smart Schools initiative provide replicable blueprints for Pakistan, offering cost-effective and locally adaptable solutions. Solar panels could guarantee uninterrupted power for classroom cooling and digital learning during outages – a critical upgrade given schools' frequent load-shedding challenges.

The Punjab Child Labour Survey 2019–20 and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Labour Survey 2022 identified transportation barriers as a major factor contributing to school attrition, particularly among rural secondary-level students. Long travel distances often force adolescents to discontinue their education, with girls disproportionately affected due to parental safety concerns and cultural norms that limit their mobility.

The issue of ghost teachers—educators who draw salaries without fulfilling their duties—continues to undermine the education system, with cases reported in Sindh and Balochistan in 2024.<sup>57</sup> This practice diverts critical resources from already underfunded schools, exacerbating existing challenges. Such corruption transcends financial damage, eroding public confidence in education. It thrives due to politicised hiring, flawed biometric controls, and no legal framework for wage recovery. Additionally, the lack of timely availability of textbooks, reported in KP and Sindh in 2024, further hampers the quality of education.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the persistent prevalence of corporal punishment in schools remains a significant barrier to creating a safe and supportive learning environment. Addressing these interconnected systemic failures remains critical for meaningful education reform in Pakistan.

### 3.3 Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes refer to the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities that students are expected to acquire at specific educational levels. They measure the effectiveness of education systems, guide curriculum development, and inform policies to improve student performance, retention, and long-term socio-economic opportunities.

**Table 10: Class 5 Learning Levels by Province (%) (Rural)**

Province	Can Read Sentences in English	Can Read Story in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto	Can Do 2-Digit Division
Balochistan	37	46	26
KP	48	44	49
Punjab	67	65	61
Sindh	22	39	27

Source: ASER 2023

Pakistan is facing a 'learning crisis,' as highlighted by the ASER 2023 report, which reveals persistent challenges in foundational literacy and numeracy among children aged 5-16 in rural areas. Nationally, 50% of Grade 5 students can read a story in Urdu or their local language, showing modest improvement since 2014 (46.4%) but a significant decline from pre-pandemic levels (59% in 2019). Similarly, 46% of Grade 5 students can perform two-digit division, reflecting a

<sup>57</sup> Education – the state of children in Pakistan. (n.d.) <https://stateofchildren.com/category/child-rights/education-child-rights/>

<sup>58</sup> Education – the state of children in Pakistan. (n.d.) <https://stateofchildren.com/category/child-rights/education-child-rights/>

drop from 57% in 2019. These declines illustrate the compounded impact of COVID-19 disruptions, systemic inequities, and climate-related challenges. Boys outperform girls across all foundational competencies, and urban students demonstrate better outcomes than their rural counterparts.

Punjab leads in learning outcomes, with 65% of Grade 5 students able to read a story in Urdu and 61% able to solve two-digit division problems. KP shows mixed results, with 44% able to read and 49% able to perform two-digit division. In Balochistan, 46% can read a story, but the province records the weakest outcomes in two-digit division tasks, with only 26% able to solve basic arithmetic problems. Sindh, despite showing recovery in enrolment, remains behind in learning, with only 39% of children able to read a story and 27% able to perform two-digit division.

The foundational learning challenges in Pakistan are deeply rooted in systemic gaps. ASER 2023 reveals persistent inconsistencies in structured teacher training programmes, particularly in rural schools, where outdated pedagogical methods continue to dominate. Overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of learning materials further undermine instructional quality. Additionally, a misalignment between curriculum content and student learning levels encourages rote memorisation over meaningful learning, perpetuating poor outcomes across the system.

In a regional context, Pakistan lags behind neighbouring countries in foundational literacy and numeracy. The World Bank's Learning Poverty indicator reveals that 77% of 10-year-olds in Pakistan cannot read and understand a simple story, compared to 58% in India and 46% in Sri Lanka. This highlights the urgency of investing in evidence-based solutions and improving instructional delivery, especially at the primary level.

The DEPIx Report 2023 evaluated Learning performance across Pakistan through four parameters: Grade 3 Proficiency, Grade 4 Proficiency, Passing Rate in Matric Examinations, and Adult Literacy Levels. The federal capital, ICT, scored the highest among all regions. Among the provinces, Punjab performed the best, followed closely by Sindh. In contrast, Balochistan and KP trailed behind, showing lower performance levels compared to the other regions.

### 3.4 Inclusion and Equity in Education

Inclusion and equity in education emphasise ensuring that every child, irrespective of their background, abilities, or circumstances, has access to quality learning opportunities tailored to their needs. In Pakistan, this is especially critical for marginalised groups, including children with disabilities, children from minority communities, girls, and transgender children, who face systemic barriers to participation and achievement in education.

#### Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities in Pakistan face barriers to accessing quality education. A key challenge is the lack of comprehensive data on children with disabilities, which is critical for understanding the scale of their needs and determining the level of support required to address these challenges effectively. According to a World Bank study, among employed individuals with disabilities (aged 18 to 65), only 27% have completed primary education, compared to 42% of employed individuals without disabilities.<sup>59</sup> The absence of inclusive infrastructure and specialised support severely limits educational opportunities for children with disabilities, perpetuating their marginalisation.

<sup>59</sup>The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, Roman, S., Bartels-Ellis, F., & Upton, P. (2014). Moving from the margins: Mainstreaming persons with disabilities in Pakistan. [https://www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/default/files/moving\\_from\\_the\\_margins\\_final.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.pk/sites/default/files/moving_from_the_margins_final.pdf)

The ASER 2023 report provides some important insights into the number and facilities for children with disabilities in Pakistan.<sup>60</sup> At the national level (rural), 11% of surveyed government schools and 11% of private schools reported having children with disabilities.<sup>61</sup>

**Table 11: Percentage of Schools Enrolling Children with Disabilities by Education Level**

Levels	Govt. Schools	Private Schools
Primary	9	6
Elementary	18	12
Secondary	15	16
Other	-	12
Overall	11	11

Source: ASER 2023

The survey reveals that physical accessibility remains inadequate in schools, with only 23% of government schools and 55% of private schools equipped with ramps, while accessible toilets are available in 51% of government and 57% of private schools. Critical support services, such as hearing assistive devices and specialised staff, remain scarce and available in only 21% of private schools and virtually non-existent in government institutions. Disabilities related to vision and mobility are the most commonly observed; however, even these cases average fewer than one child per school, highlighting gaps in identification and inclusion.

**Table 12: Facilities for Children with Disabilities in Schools (% Schools)**

Facilities in Schools	Government Schools				Private Schools				
	Primary	Elementary	Secondary	Overall	Primary	Elementary	Secondary	Other	Overall
Ramps	19	28	41	23	51	47	57	65	55
Accessible Toilets	49	51	64	51	53	62	54	61	57
Health and Nutrition Officer	7	15	25	10	12	12	16	12	12
Other Facilities* (Special staff, hearing assistive devices, Transport)	0	0	0	0	18	21	22	22	21

Source: ASER 2023

### Children from Minority Backgrounds

Children from minority backgrounds in Pakistan face challenges in accessing inclusive and equitable education. Systemic biases in curricula, teaching practices, and institutional attitudes perpetuate marginalisation. The intersectionality of vulnerabilities faced by minority children stemming from religion, caste, gender, and geographic location restricts their access to education. Neither the Pakistan Education Statistics 2022–23 report nor the Census 2023 provide enrolment data or the number of OOSC belonging to a minority group. This lack of

<sup>60</sup>Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA). (2024). Annual Status of Education Report: ASER Pakistan 2023. Lahore

<sup>61</sup>The disabilities were assessed using the Washington Group/UNICEF Module on Child Functioning, which examines six areas: visual, hearing, physical, intellectual, self-care, and communication.

disaggregated data hinders efforts to understand and address the educational problems of minority communities.

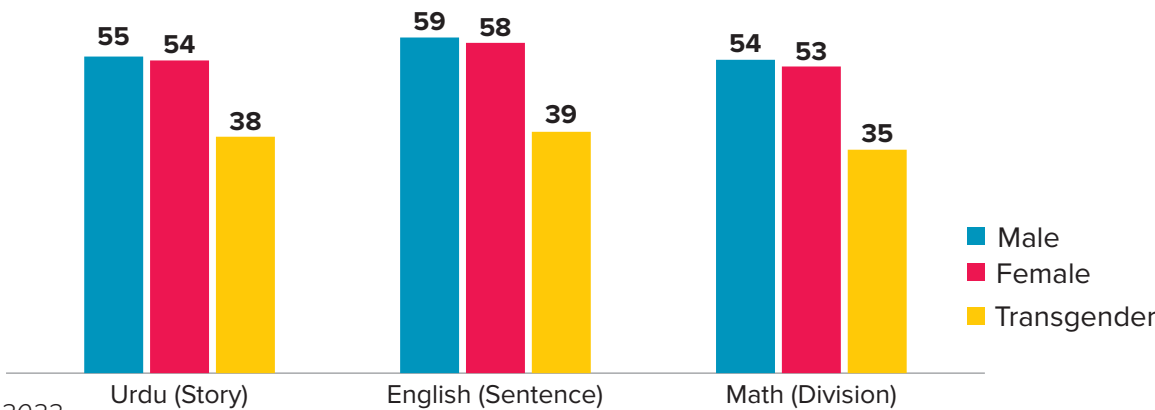
Different studies reveal that 60% of non-Muslim students report experiencing disrespect or prejudice in schools, while 72% of parents believe their children are discriminated against due to their faith.<sup>62</sup> Textbooks in public schools and madrassas often portray minorities, including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs, in negative terms, fostering prejudice and violating constitutional principles.<sup>63</sup> There is also under-representation of non-Muslims in the teaching workforce. The Punjab Commission on the Status of Women reveals that literacy rates among women from minority groups lagging 28% behind those of the majority community.<sup>64</sup>

Transgender Children

Transgender children in Pakistan also face challenges in accessing education due to societal stigma, discrimination, and systemic barriers. A study published in the Journal of Peace, Development and Communication highlights that approximately 57% of transgender students have experienced bullying or harassment in educational institutions.<sup>65</sup> Despite these adversities, a substantial majority (96%) believe that their school experiences contribute positively to achieving their long-term goals. However, concerns persist regarding governmental efforts and institutional funding, with 65% expressing dissatisfaction with state initiatives and 91% deeming current financial support inadequate.

A 2021 study by the Centre for Gender and Policy Studies in Pakistan found that only a small percentage of transgender children are enrolled in schools, and those who do attend often face severe discrimination.<sup>66</sup> According to a 2020 report by the HRCP, many transgender children are forced to leave school early due to pressure from peers, teachers, and even family members, who may not accept their gender identity.<sup>67</sup> The ASER 2023 revealed that the learning levels of transgender children aged 3–16 years in rural areas of Pakistan are lower than those of girls and boys.<sup>68</sup>

Effective Transition Rates in Pakistan



Source: ASER 2023

<sup>62</sup>Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, & Institute of Development Research and Corresponding Capabilities. (2019). Education and inequality: Discerning the foundation of citizenry. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

<sup>63</sup>U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2011). Connecting the dots: Education and religious discrimination in Pakistan. U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

<sup>64</sup>Punjab Commission on the Status of Women. (2024). Social and economic well-being of women in Punjab. Punjab Commission on the Status of Women

<sup>65</sup>Munir, S., Kiran, S. and Ibrahim, S. 2024. Barriers Faced by Transgender Community in Educational Institutions. Journal of Policy Research. 10, 2 (Jun. 2024), 627–632.

<sup>66</sup>Centre for Gender and Policy Studies. (2021). Education access and challenges for transgender children in Pakistan. Islamabad, Pakistan

<sup>67</sup>Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. (2020). State of transgender rights in Pakistan. Lahore, Pakistan

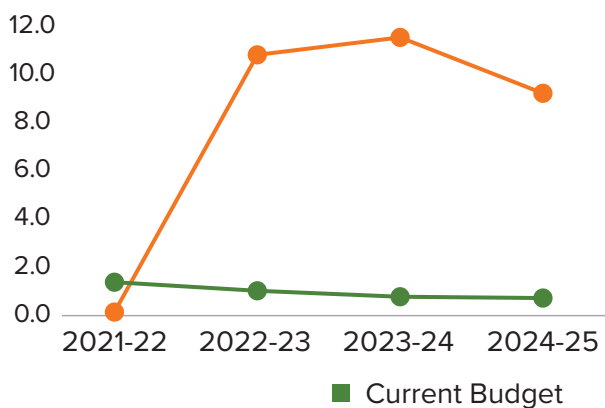
<sup>68</sup>Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA). (2024). Annual Status of Education Report: ASER Pakistan 2023. Lahore

In recent years, there has been some progress in addressing the challenges faced by transgender children, including the establishment of dedicated schools in Punjab. However, sustained and more comprehensive efforts are required to create fully inclusive and supportive educational environments that genuinely accommodate and welcome transgender individuals

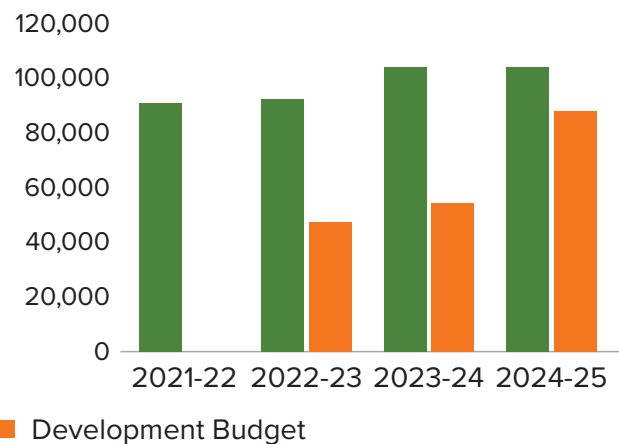
### 3.5 Education Financing

Pakistan's expenditure on education remains one of the lowest in the region and globally, with a declining share of GDP dedicated to the sector. In 2024, the allocation for education has dropped to 1.7% of GDP,<sup>69</sup> a sharp decline from 2.1% in 2020.<sup>70</sup> It is lower than the global average of 4.3% and the South Asian average of 2.9%. This underinvestment highlights a key challenge for the country in prioritising education funding, impacting overall educational outcomes and sectoral development.

**Percentage Share of Education Budget in Total Provincial Budget**



**Education Budget Allocations (million)**



Source: CPDI- Pakistan

#### Federal and Provincial Budget Trends

While education budgets have increased in absolute terms at both federal and provincial levels, their share within overall government spending has consistently declined. For instance, the federal education budget fell from 1.09% of the total federal budget in 2021-22 to 0.60% in 2024-25.<sup>71</sup> Provincial trends exhibit mixed performance: Sindh maintained a consistent allocation of 20–22% of its total budget for education, while Punjab saw a decline from 4.95% to 3.26% over the same period. Sindh and Balochistan have allocated a larger share of their development budgets to primary and secondary education.

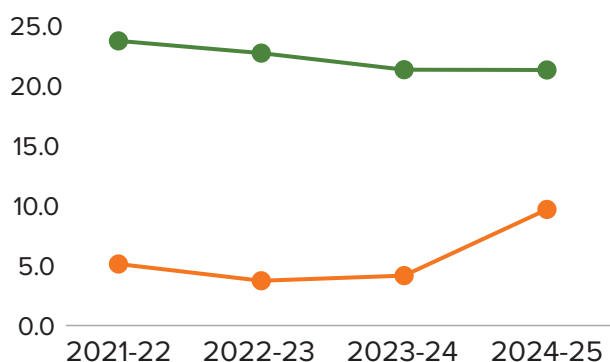
<sup>69</sup>Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives Pakistan (2024). EVALUATING TRENDS IN EDUCATION BUDGET ALLOCATION IN PAKISTAN. In BRIEFING PAPER. <https://cpdi-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Briefing-Paper-Education-Budget-Allocation-in-Pakistan.pdf>

<sup>70</sup>Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA). (2024). Annual Status of Education Report: ASER Pakistan 2023. Lahore

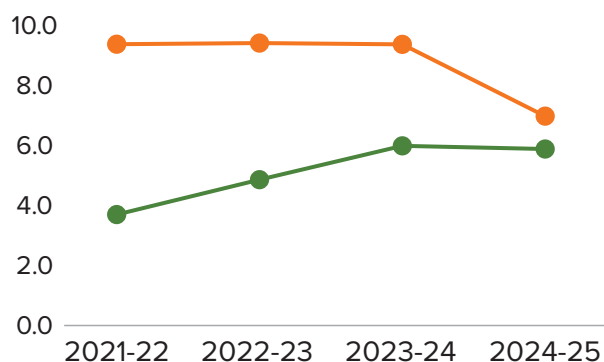
<sup>71</sup>Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives Pakistan (2024). EVALUATING TRENDS IN EDUCATION BUDGET ALLOCATION IN PAKISTAN. In BRIEFING PAPER. <https://cpdi-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Briefing-Paper-Education-Budget-Allocation-in-Pakistan.pdf>

### Percentage Share of Education Budget in Total Provincial Budget

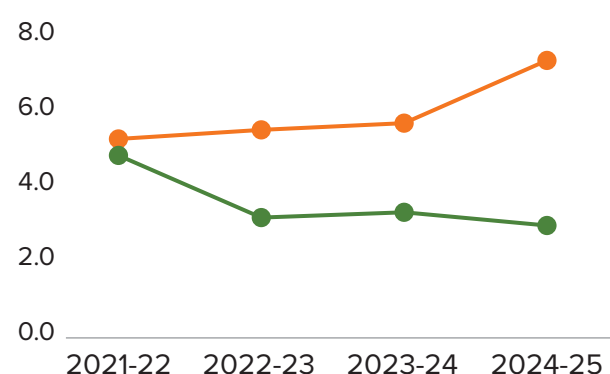
#### Balochistan



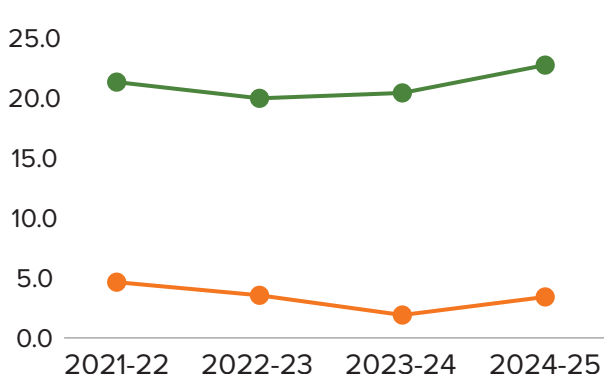
#### Khyber Pakhtunkhwa



#### Punjab



#### Sindh



■ Current Budget      ■ Development Budget

Source: CPDI- Pakistan

### Sector-Wise Allocation

A major portion of education budgets is directed towards tertiary education, particularly at the federal level, where 76% of the current budget and 90% of the development budget are allocated to this sector. Similar trends are evident in KP, where tertiary education receives 73% of the current budget.<sup>72</sup> This disproportionate allocation limits investment in primary and secondary education, which are crucial for improving literacy and foundational learning outcomes. In contrast, Sindh adopts a more balanced approach, allocating 33% of its current budget to secondary education and 29% to primary and pre-primary education, prioritising foundational learning infrastructure.

### Education Financing Inefficiencies, Inequities and the Need for Reform

Despite absolute increases in funding, the declining share of education within total government expenditure at both federal and provincial levels reflects a lack of prioritisation of educational sector. Pakistan needs to spend more and better on education. The country's low allocation is contributing to high dropout rates, learning poverty, reduced human capital, and stunted economic growth.

Pakistan's education financing not only suffers from low GDP allocation but also from inefficiencies in fund utilisation. A significant proportion of funds remain underutilised which has a direct impact on educational outcomes. The underutilisation of funds has direct consequences

<sup>72</sup>Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives Pakistan (2024). EVALUATING TRENDS IN EDUCATION BUDGET ALLOCATION IN PAKISTAN. In BRIEFING PAPER. <https://cpdi-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Briefing-Paper-Education-Budget-Allocation-in-Pakistan.pdf>



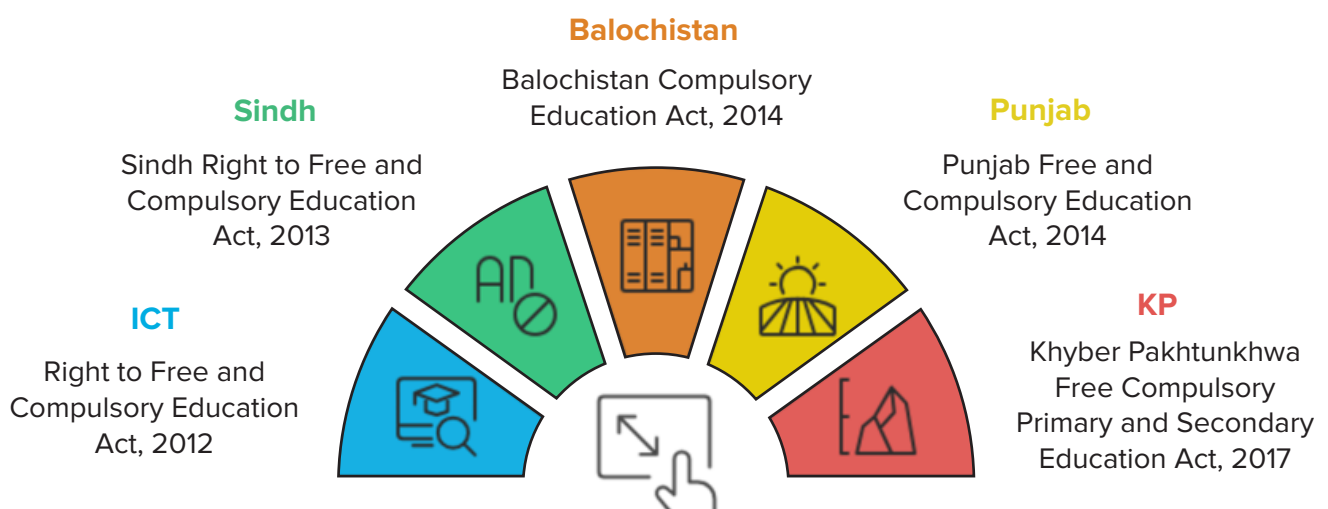
for school infrastructure, learning conditions, and student retention. Many schools, especially in rural areas, lack basic facilities such as classrooms, toilets, and electricity, contributing to high dropout rates and poor educational outcomes. A major concern is the high proportion of recurrent expenditure, estimates indicate that around 70% of the education budget continues to be allocated to salaries, with approximately 10% directed towards development expenditures—which often remain unspent. This imbalance restricts investment in essential infrastructure, teacher training, and learning materials, particularly in rural areas. Financial leakages, including ghost teachers and bureaucratic inefficiencies, further undermine the system's effectiveness.

Beyond inefficiencies, Pakistan's education spending is also inequitable, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities, including low-income families, rural populations, girls, children with disabilities, and minorities. The combination of low and inefficient spending results in stark regional disparities in enrolment, progression, and learning outcomes. Pakistan needs to prioritise equity-driven budgeting, and ensure that disadvantaged regions and populations receive targeted interventions. Addressing these challenges requires stronger financial oversight, improved budget execution, and enhanced transparency mechanisms to ensure that allocated funds are efficiently utilised.

### 3.6 Legal Framework

The 18th Amendment to the Constitution (2010) devolved education to the provinces, making them responsible for implementing Article 25-A, which guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged 5–16. Consequently, ICT and every province enacted its own Right to Free and Compulsory Education Acts, including ICT (2012), Sindh (2013), Punjab (2014), Balochistan (2014), and KP (2017). Despite these legal frameworks, enforcement remains inconsistent and hampered by a lack of effective coordination among the various departments responsible for education governance. For instance, these laws mandate school attendance for children, yet there are no robust mechanisms to hold parents, education officials, or local authorities accountable when children are not admitted or do not attend school.

#### Education Acts in Pakistan



All provincial governments developed Education Sector Plans (ESPs) to comply with Article 25-A of the Constitution, including the Punjab Education Sector Plan (2019/20–2023/24), Sindh Education Sector Plan (2019–2024), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Plan (2020/21–2024/25), and Balochistan Education Sector Plan (2020–2025). These plans focus on infrastructure development, teacher training, governance reforms, and addressing province-specific challenges. However, budgetary constraints, inadequate school expansion, and teacher shortages remain major challenges in achieving these plans' objectives.<sup>73</sup> For instance, Punjab faces 115,000 vacant teaching positions, while flood damage in Sindh and KP has left many schools without basic facilities.

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018, explicitly prohibits discrimination in education and mandates equal access to learning opportunities, including vocational training. In December 2024, Pakistan enacted the Societies Registration (Amendment) Act, 2024, and introduced new regulations for the registration and oversight of madrassas. While the impact of this law remains uncertain, many children continue to enrol in madrassas not by choice, but due to the absence of accessible public schooling options and the government's failure to provide viable alternatives.

Pakistan imposed an "Education Emergency" in May 2024, recognising the scale of the country's education crisis. However, the emergency has yet to translate into transformative changes. While policy commitments exist, systemic barriers remain unaddressed. Without stronger enforcement of education laws, sustained financial investment, and improved coordination among education departments, the goal of universal education under Article 25-A remains distant and unattainable.

### **Institutional Framework**

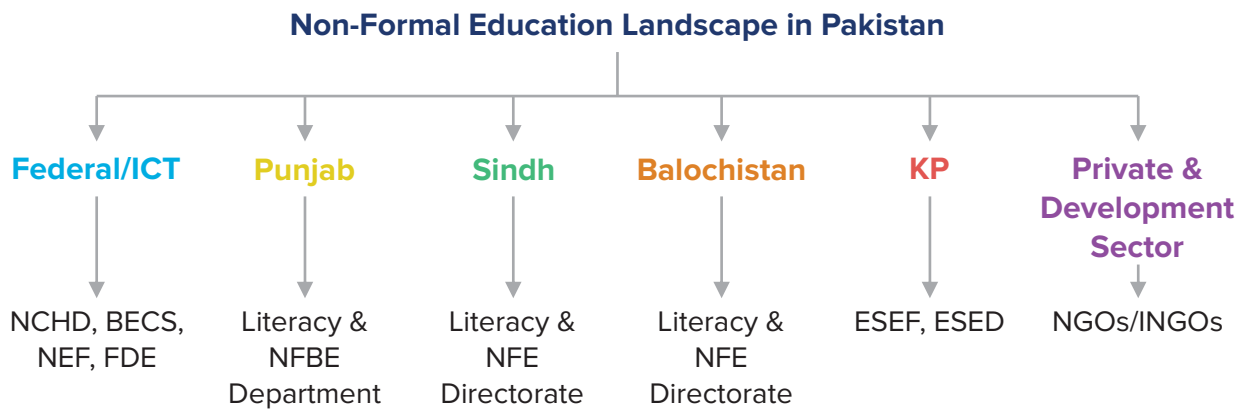
The institutional framework for education in Pakistan operates under a decentralised system, with responsibilities divided between federal and provincial authorities. At the federal level, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MoFEPT) oversees national policies, standards, and international commitments, while the Higher Education Commission (HEC) regulates higher education institutions, ensuring quality standards, funding, and research initiatives. Various education-related bodies, such as the Pakistan Institute of Education (PIE) and the National Curriculum Council (NCC), play a pivotal role in data collection, policy research, and curriculum development. Following the 18th Amendment, provinces have autonomous control over primary and secondary education, with each province maintaining its own education department and policies and managing public schools, including curriculum delivery, teacher recruitment, and budget allocation. District education offices oversee education delivery at the grassroots level, addressing issues such as teacher deployment, school infrastructure, and student enrolment.

The Non-Formal Basic Education (NFBE) framework in Pakistan provides second-chance education for OOSC through federal, provincial, and private sector institutions. At the federal level, NFBE is managed by NCHD, BECS, NEF, and FDE, while provinces oversee it through dedicated Literacy & NFBE Departments or Directorates.

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<sup>73</sup>National Commission on the Rights of Child (2024). Policy Brief on Free and Compulsory Education





Special education operates under a separate institutional structure at both federal and provincial levels, distinct from mainstream education. At the federal level, the MoFEPT has a Special Education Wing, which is responsible for formulating policies, developing curricula, and overseeing programmes for individuals with disabilities. Similarly, each province has its own Special Education Department or Directorate of Special Education, tasked with policy implementation, administration, and service delivery for children with disabilities. These departments function independently from the regular school education departments.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions operate at both federal and provincial levels, managing skills training and workforce development. However, TEVTAs do not adequately cater to older children (14 years and above who cannot be mainstreamed into formal education), leaving them at risk of hazardous labour. Expanding TVET and targeting this group would enhance opportunities for decent work and economic empowerment.

### 3.7 Children's Right to Play

Article 31 of the UNCRC states that every child has the right to rest, leisure and age-appropriate play and recreational activities. Play is not just a leisure activity; it is an essential part of learning and creativity as well as a biological and cognitive necessity and absolutely essential for the holistic development of children.

Children in Pakistan play in a variety of ways, such as in schools with playgrounds and sports facilities, in informal neighbourhood games or open fields, and in recreational events during cultural and religious festivals. Community parks and sports clubs also offer opportunities to play. Pakistani children and youth spend the least amount of time playing during the school day when compared to other countries in South Asia.<sup>74</sup>

ASER 2023 reports a lack of playgrounds in schools. At the national level in rural areas, only 56% of government schools and 62.3% of private schools have playgrounds, with disparities across school types and education levels. For primary schools, only 48% of government schools and 55% of private schools provide playgrounds, while secondary schools fare better with 80.9% (government) and 71.7% (private).

<sup>74</sup>Ali Khayyam, (n.d.). Ensuring Every Child's Right to Play – The State of Children in Pakistan. <https://stateofchildren.com/ensuring-every-childs-right-to-play/>

Table 13: National (Rural)		
Playground Availability	Govt. Schools (%)	Private Schools (%)
Primary	48.0	55.0
Elementary	69.0	63.8
Secondary	80.9	71.7
Overall	56.0	62.3

Source: ASER 2023

Provincial data highlight significant inequities in access to playgrounds. Punjab leads among government schools, with 83.7% of schools having playgrounds, while Balochistan lags behind at 39.8%. In KP, government schools report 45.6% playground availability, and Sindh shows even lower access.<sup>75</sup> Private schools generally perform better, but access remains constrained in provinces like Sindh and Balochistan, particularly at the primary level. Where playgrounds exist in public schools, they are often poorly maintained.

Table 14: Playground Availability in Rural Schools by Sector								
Level	Government Schools (Rural) %				Private Schools (Rural) %			
	Balochistan	KP	Punjab	Sindh	Balochistan	KP	Punjab	Sindh
Primary	33.0	44.4	78.5	49.5	53.9	78.5	56.1	50.0
Elementary	61.3	53.8	84.2	68.0	67.8	84.2	61.2	75.0
Secondary	73.7	63.3	91.8	59.1	73.8	91.8	71.6	65.6
Overall	39.8	45.6	83.7	51.6	61.2	83.7	63.2	64.8

Source: ASER 2023

In urban areas, many private schools, except for elite institutions, operate in buildings or homes that are unsuitable for offering play areas. A survey conducted by the Children's Global Network Pakistan highlights that in many public schools, playtime is often neglected due to the overemphasis on academic performance.<sup>76</sup> In majority of schools, there are no Physical Education (PE) teachers at the primary school level in Pakistan, despite this being a critical stage for developing motor skills and healthy habits. At the secondary level, although PE teachers are often appointed, there is little provision for structured physical education programmes.

For OOSC, the lack of access to parks, public recreational spaces and affordability limits their opportunities to play. With many children engaged in labour or living in marginalised conditions, their right to play remains largely ignored. Girls face social and logistical challenges, from restrictive cultural norms to safety concerns while commuting.

A report by the World Bank in 2017 highlighted that green spaces in Karachi have shrunk due to urban development between the 2000s and 2010s. while vacant spaces are underutilised or underdeveloped for recreational purposes and lack recreational facilities for children (e.g. playgrounds) in particular.<sup>77</sup> Many sports fields and parks have been re-purposed for commercial

<sup>75</sup> Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA). (2024). Annual Status of Education Report: ASER Pakistan 2023. Lahore

<sup>76</sup> Ali Khayyam, (n.d.). Ensuring Every Child's Right to Play – The State of Children in Pakistan. <https://stateofchildren.com/ensuring-every-childs-right-to-play/>

<sup>77</sup> Anni Gapihan, Jon Kher Kaw & Jaafar Sadok Friaa (2017), Why enhancing public urban spaces matters for Karachi - World Bank Blogs.

use, restricting public access. Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, has several family-friendly parks such as Fatima Jinnah Park, Shakarparian National Park and Lake View Park. While these parks offer recreational opportunities, they have limited accessibility for children and lower-income families due to transport costs and other socio-economic barriers.

With changing lifestyles restricting physical activity, resulting in poor health outcomes, there is an urgent need to ensure that children have adequate opportunities to play in different settings. This must be prioritised by local governments, schools and urban planners as play is essential for promoting children's physical, mental, and social development.

### 3.8 Recommendations

Despite the government's declaration of an education emergency in Pakistan in 2024, subsequent actions have not adequately responded to the urgency of the crisis. To tackle the country's pressing education challenges effectively, the government must move beyond symbolic gestures and take substantial, demonstrable measures, supported by swift and extraordinary actions at both federal and provincial levels. This requires implementing targeted interventions to bridge critical gaps in access, quality, and equity, including:

#### Enhance Legal Enforcement

- Ensure that rules under relevant education laws (Free and Compulsory Education Acts) by provinces are promptly notified and implemented, and penalise schools for non-compliance and failing to adhere quota to underprivileged children as provided in the law.
- Introduce strong monitoring mechanisms to track compliance with these laws at the provincial and district levels.

#### Review and Development of Future Education Sector Plans

- As existing Education Sector Plans in some provinces have concluded, while others are set to end in 2025, there is an urgent need to assess their impact and develop new strategic frameworks to guide the future of education in Pakistan. All provincial governments should undertake a thorough and transparent review of their five-year Education Sector Plans, assessing key achievements, shortfalls, and systemic challenges.
- Provincial governments must design and implement new, fully costed Education Sector Plans, incorporating robust accountability mechanisms to track progress. These plans should prioritise equity, quality, and inclusivity, ensuring that all children—regardless of socio-economic background, gender, or location—have access to quality education.

#### Universalise Access to Education

- Provincial governments need to implement targeted enrolment drives for the 26 million OOSC, with a particular focus on the 20 million children who have never attended school.
- Construct schools in remote and underserved areas, ensuring all children have access to a nearby learning facility.
- Scale up Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALPs) to reintegrate dropouts and provide alternative learning pathways.

**Increase Education Financing**

- Both federal and provincial government need to work collectively and raise education spending to at least 4% of GDP, aligning with global and regional standards with investments in underserved regions such as Balochistan and rural Sindh should be prioritised.
- Rebalance budget priorities to allocate at least 20-25% of education funds toward development projects, focusing on infrastructure, teacher training, and learning resources. The current focus on tertiary education has limited the impact of spending on foundational education, where literacy and learning outcomes are most critical.
- Increase budgetary allocations for special education to ensure adequate facilities, assistive devices, and specialised teaching staff.
- Improve the planning, execution, and monitoring of development budgets to reduce delays and underutilisation.

**Improving the Quality of Education**

- There is a strong need to invest in continuous professional development for teachers, ensuring they are equipped with modern pedagogical skills. Establish comprehensive training programmes to equip teachers with the skills required to address diverse learning needs, including those of children with disabilities.
- Develop an inclusive curriculum that emphasises critical thinking, creativity, and practical application of knowledge.
- Provide digital tools and internet connectivity to underserved schools, enabling access to modern educational resources.

**Promote Gender Equality**

- Provincial governments should ensure gender-sensitive infrastructure in schools, including boundary walls, separate toilets, and safe transportation.
- Conduct community outreach to address socio-cultural norms that hinder girls' education, particularly in rural areas.
- Use gender-disaggregated data to identify and address gaps in enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes.

**Reduce Dropout Rates**

- Federal and provincial governments need to create mechanisms to track dropouts, follow-up with families and identify underlying causes.
- Implement case management systems to support at-risk students, including financial incentives, counselling, and after-school programmes.
- Provide targeted support to re-enrol dropouts in formal or non-formal education, including vocational training options.

### **Promoting Inclusive and Equitable Education**

- Expand educational opportunities for children from minority groups, low-income families, and those with disabilities by addressing specific barriers.
- Conduct a survey to gather accurate data on OOSC with disabilities and those belonging to minority groups to support informed policy-making and resource allocation.
- Implement inclusive education policies mandating the integration of children with mild disabilities into mainstream schools. Ensure schools are equipped with ramps, assistive devices, and accessible facilities for children with disabilities.
- Integrate multicultural and inclusive content into curricula to foster acceptance and understanding.
- Set up at least one specialised education complex in every district to provide tailored services, therapy, and inclusive recreational opportunities.

### **Special Schemes for Vulnerable Children**

- Expand the scope of social protection initiatives, such as conditional cash transfer programmes linked to school attendance (e.g., Taleemi Wazaif, Waseela Taleem), through horizontal expansion to cover more beneficiaries across underserved areas and vertical expansion to include children at the secondary education level. This would incentivise enrolment and retention for both girls and boys.
- Introduce school meal programmes at the primary level to enhance enrolment, improve retention, boost learning outcomes, and support the overall well-being of children, particularly in rural and vulnerable communities.
- Develop targeted TVET programmes for out-of-school adolescents and older children, equipping them with market-relevant skills and alternative learning pathways.

### **Reform Public-Private Collaboration**

- Federal and provincial government should establish frameworks to monitor fees, teacher wages, and learning outcomes in private schools to ensure equity and accountability.
- Leverage private sector expertise to manage schools, but with clear oversight to protect public education goals.

### **Mitigate Impacts of Climate Change and Disasters**

- Provincial governments need to reconstruct schools damaged by floods and other disasters with climate-resilient designs.
- Provincial governments must mandate climate-resilient construction codes for all new schools, with priority given to high-risk regions such as flood-prone areas and earthquake-vulnerable zones.
- Climate adaptation requires cross-sector coordination. Provincial Education Departments should map schools in climate-vulnerable zones, train staff in emergency response protocols, and collaborate with the NDMA to develop and implement the Comprehensive School Safety Framework.

- Develop contingency plans to ensure education continuity during emergencies, including temporary learning spaces and digital solutions.

### **Play and Holistic Development of Children**

- All schools should introduce a play policy which requires 30-45 minutes of daily play in schools.
- Provincial governments should convert available vacant urban land into safe playgrounds through local government-education department partnerships.

# 4. Children's Right to Survival

The right to survival is a foundational aspect of children's rights, recognising their inherent entitlement to life and the conditions necessary to sustain it. This right obligates states to ensure that every child has access to basic necessities that safeguard their well-being and enable them to thrive. Children's survival entails access to quality healthcare, adequate nutrition, clean drinking water, sanitation, and protection from environmental risks. *This chapter explores the multifaceted dimensions of children's survival in Pakistan, addressing health, nutrition, water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH), and the interplay between climate change and child well-being.*

## 4.1 Child Survival Indicators

Child mortality rates are essential indicators not only of the children but of the entire nation's health status. They reflect the efficacy of healthcare systems and highlight deficiencies in the system and the child survival strategies employed. Reducing child mortality remains a major challenge for Pakistan given its link with poverty, inequity, inequality, quality of care, social injustice and food insecurity.<sup>78</sup>

Table 15: Child Mortality Indicators of Pakistan (per 1,000 live births)			
Child Mortality Indicators	1990	2000	2022
Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR)	64	57	39
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	107	64	51
Under-5 Mortality Rate (U5MR)	140	108	61

Source: UNICEF 2024

### Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR)

Pakistan's Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR) is high at 39 deaths per 1,000 live births,<sup>79</sup> accounting for 64% of all under-five deaths. According to MICS findings, Punjab reports the highest NMRs at 33<sup>80</sup> followed by Balochistan at 29.<sup>81</sup> The high rates are attributed to critical gaps in maternal and newborn health care, such as limited access to skilled birth attendants, inadequate facilities for newborn care like incubators and insufficient health infrastructure.

### Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)

The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) in Pakistan is 51 deaths per 1,000 live births.<sup>82</sup> This is an indication that children are exposed to considerable risks in the first year of their lives. Punjab reports the highest IMR at 49,<sup>83</sup> followed by Balochistan with 48 IMR.<sup>84</sup> Preventable causes such as infections,

<sup>78</sup>UNICEF. (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

<sup>79</sup>UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World. (2024).

<sup>80</sup>Punjab MICS 2017-18

<sup>81</sup>Balochistan MICS 2019-20

<sup>82</sup>UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World.

<sup>83</sup>Punjab MICS 2017-18

<sup>84</sup>Balochistan MICS 2019-20

respiratory diseases, diarrhoea, malnutrition and inadequate immunisation coverage remain key contributors to the IMR indication the State's failure to provide basic health system support.

Under-5 Mortality Rate (U5MR)

Pakistan's under-five mortality rate (U5MR) is 61 deaths per 1,000 live births.<sup>85</sup> In Punjab, the U5MR is 55,<sup>86</sup> followed by Balochistan with 53 U5MR.<sup>87</sup> This indicates persistent barriers in accessing healthcare in rural areas and the ineffectiveness of health programmes especially in the aforementioned provinces.

Table 16: Mortality Indicators of Provinces (per 1,000 live births)			
Region	Neonatal Mortality Rate (NMR)	Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)	Under-5 Mortality Rate (U5MR)
Balochistan	29	48	53
KP	23	35	39
Punjab	33	49	55
Sindh	24	39	46

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2024, Sindh 2018-19)

The analysis of the data also reveals that childhood mortality rates decrease uniformly as the mother's education increases.<sup>88</sup> Also, the U5MR is higher when the interval between births is not optimal – i.e. when a child is born less than two years after a previous birth, compared to children born three years after a previous birth. The findings suggest importance of birth planning / family planning in prevention of mortality rates.

4.2 Childhood Immunisation Coverage

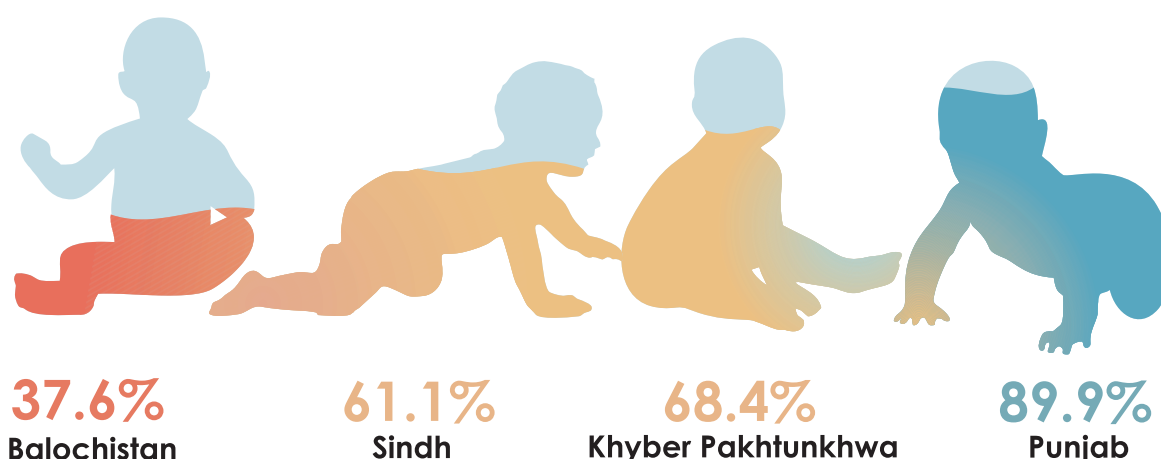
Immunisation is a vital component of child health, shielding children from preventable diseases, and contributing to reduced mortality and morbidity rates. It remains one of the most fundamental competencies of public health programmes in Pakistan.

The immunisation coverage in Pakistan reflects progress in protecting children against vaccine-preventable diseases. Over the course of 30 years from 1990 to 2020, Pakistan more than doubled its immunisation coverage (an increase of 117.6%).<sup>89</sup> During that period the proportion of fully immunised children aged 12–23 months increased from 35% to 76%. There was no noteworthy variation by gender in 2020, with 76.6% of female children and 76.2% of male children fully vaccinated.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>85</sup>UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World.  
<sup>86</sup>Punjab MICS 2017-18  
<sup>87</sup>Balochistan MICS 2019-20  
<sup>88</sup>National Institute of Population Studies, Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017–18, NIPS, Islamabad.  
<sup>89</sup>Mahmud, I., & Kashif, A. (2021). Immunization for Pakistan's healthy future. World Bank Group.  
<sup>90</sup>Mahmud, I., & Kashif, A. (2021). Immunization for Pakistan's healthy future. World Bank Group.



### Percentage of fully immunised children (aged 12 to 23 months) in Pakistan



Source: World Bank (2021)

The proportion of fully immunised<sup>91</sup> children varied among the four provinces, from 38% in Balochistan to almost 90% in Punjab in 2020.<sup>92</sup> Notable challenges to vaccine service delivery in Balochistan are difficult terrain and security issues. Sindh demonstrates stable coverage in urban cities like Karachi, but rural areas lag due to logistical barriers. In KP, districts such as Abbottabad report over 90% coverage, yet many rural areas remain underserved.<sup>93</sup> These challenges stem from logistical failures, vaccine hesitancy, and weak follow-up mechanisms.

In 2023, coverage for BCG (96%) and the first dose of DTP (94%) indicates good initial uptake, suggesting effective outreach for early-life immunisations.<sup>94</sup> The relatively higher coverage of the Rotavirus vaccine (90%) demonstrates progress in combating diarrhoeal diseases, a leading cause of child mortality in Pakistan. Coverage for MCV1 (vaccine used against measles) (84%) and MCV2 (80%) remains below optimal levels, raising concerns given the persistent threat of measles outbreaks in vulnerable regions. Coverage declines for subsequent doses, such as DTP3 and Polio3 (both at 86%), pointing to challenges in retaining children within immunisation schedules as well as cold chain disruptions, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient community mobilisation hinder effective vaccine delivery.

**Table 17: Vaccines Coverage in Pakistan (%)**

Vaccines	Coverage
<b>BCG</b> (Tuberculosis)	96
<b>DTP1</b> (Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis - First Dose)	94
<b>DTP3</b> (Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis - Third Dose)	86
<b>Polio3</b> (Polio - Third Dose)	86
<b>MCV1</b> (Measles-Containing Vaccine - First Dose)	84
<b>MCV2 (F)</b> (Measles-Containing Vaccine - Second Dose)	80

<sup>91</sup>To have received all basic vaccinations, a child must receive at least: 1 dose of BCG vaccine, which protects against tuberculosis; 3 doses of DPT vaccine, which protects against diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus; 3 doses of polio vaccine; and 1 dose of measles vaccine

<sup>92</sup>Mahmud, I., & Kashif, A. (2021). Immunization for Pakistan's healthy future. World Bank Group.

<sup>93</sup>Mahmud, I., & Kashif, A. (2021). Immunization for Pakistan's healthy future. World Bank Group.

<sup>94</sup>UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World

Vaccines	Coverage
<b>HepB3</b> (Hepatitis B - Third Dose)	86
<b>Hib3</b> (Haemophilus Influenzae Type B - Third Dose)	86
<b>Rota</b> (Rotavirus Vaccine)	90
<b>PCV3</b> (Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine - Third Dose)	86
<b>Protection at Birth (PAB)</b> (Against Tetanus)	86

Source: UNICEF 2024

The coverage and quality gaps places substantial financial and systemic burdens on families and the healthcare system. Resources that could be allocated to other critical health services are diverted by the state to address preventable illnesses, compounding the challenges faced by Pakistan's already strained healthcare infrastructure.<sup>95</sup>

### 4.3 Malnutrition among Children

Malnutrition among children in Pakistan remain a public health issue, compromising growth, development, and overall well-being especially among poor and rural households.

#### Nutritional status of Children Under-five

Children in Pakistan are facing triple burden of malnutrition: over 40% of children under the age of five are stunted, 17.7% suffer from wasting and over 50% from suffering from micronutrient deficiencies, while overweight/obesity and diet related non-communicable diseases are on the rise. Over 22% of newborn babies are born with low birth weight.<sup>96</sup> Pakistan is off course from attaining the nutrition related SDGs targets, and demonstrating inadequate performance on improving nutrition indicators, compared to other countries in the South Asia region.

Table 18: Malnutritional Indicators of Children Under-five (%)			
Indicator	Total	Boys	Girls
Stunting	40.0	40.9	39.4
Wasting	17.7	18.4	17.0
Underweight	29.0	29.3	28.4
Overweight	9.5	9.7	9.2

Source: NNS 2018

The pattern of malnutrition distribution among boys and girls remains the same, with boys being more affected by all forms of malnutrition than girls. Wasting (low weight-for-height, indicating acute undernutrition and recent weight loss), stunting (low height-for-age, reflecting chronic malnutrition and long-term deprivation), and underweight (low weight-for-age, capturing both acute and chronic malnutrition) are more prevalent among children living in rural areas than their peers in urban areas. In contrast, being overweight affects all children equally across locations and gender.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World  
<sup>96</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan  
<sup>97</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

Among provinces, Sindh and Balochistan have the highest rates of stunting, wasting, and underweight children, which indicate severe nutritional deficiencies and systemic inequities.<sup>98</sup> ICT and Punjab figures are comparatively lower but Punjab province still faces challenges, for example the rising prevalence of overweight children. In KP, the indicators align with national averages; yet they reveal nutritional disparities, with some districts experiencing more acute vulnerabilities than others.

**Table 19: Provincial/Regional Breakdown of Malnutrition Indicators (%)**

Region	Stunting	Wasting	Underweight	Overweight
ICT	32.6	12.1	19.2	5.8
Balochistan	46.6	18.9	31.0	16.7
KP	40.0	15.0	23.1	12.9
Punjab	36.4	15.3	23.5	9.9
Sindh	45.5	23.3	41.3	5.2

Source: NNS 2018

The prevalence of childhood wasting among children in Balochistan and Sindh exceeds the emergency threshold of 15%. Major predictors of wasting in Pakistan include poor maternal nutrition and inadequate sanitation. The reasons for the high rates of stunting are manifold and multifaceted. They are related to poor infant and young child feeding practices, low rates of exclusive breastfeeding, insufficient awareness of good eating and care practices, affordability issues and the impact of poverty and geographical location's accessibility (urban/rural).<sup>99</sup>

### Micronutrient Deficiencies in Children (6-59 months)

Micronutrient deficiencies are widespread among children, with high prevalence rates of anaemia, iron deficiency, vitamin A and D deficiencies, and zinc deficiency, especially among children in Balochistan and Sindh.<sup>100</sup> Punjab and KP fare slightly better, but still have worrying levels of deficiency for anaemia and vitamin D. ICT has the lowest prevalence overall but faces the problem of vitamin A and vitamin D deficiency.

**Table 20: Micronutrient Deficiencies (%)**

Region	Anaemia	Iron Deficiency	Vitamin A Deficiency	Vitamin D Deficiency	Zinc Deficiency
Pakistan	53.7	28.6	51.5	62.7	18.6
ICT	24.3	16.8	43.3	44.6	9.9
Balochistan	70.5	23.1	58.5	70.9	21.8
KP	60.8	20.3	46.7	77.0	18.6
Punjab	52.1	29.7	49.1	70.7	18.0
Sindh	51.1	32.4	57.8	37.0	19.2

Source: NNS 2018

<sup>98</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

<sup>99</sup> UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

<sup>100</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

In Pakistan, 41.7% of mothers are affected by anaemia, one of the main causes of premature birth, low birth weight and perinatal mortality.<sup>101</sup> About 18.2% of women of reproductive age suffer from iron deficiency anaemia, which is one of the main causes of anaemia in infants and young children. This is a little more pronounced in women in rural areas (18.7%) than in urban areas (17.4%).

### Infant and Young Child Feeding Practices (Breastfeeding & Complementary Feeding)

Breastfeeding is vital for a child's survival, providing optimal nutrition, immunity, cognitive development, emotional bonding, and long-term health benefits according to many research studies. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that children should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of their lives, and that age-appropriate complementary and supplementary feed should be introduced after this time period to prevent malnutrition. Pakistan's strong culture of breastfeeding is challenged by various factors including the aggressive and unregulated marketing of breast milk substitutes, where only less than half (45.8%) of Pakistani babies start breastfeeding within the first hour of birth. Prevalence of the practice of continued breastfeeding is highest at one year of age (68.4%) and thereafter decreases to 56.5% at two years of age.<sup>102</sup>

Table 21: Breastfeeding in Pakistan (%)				
Region	Within the first hour of birth	Exclusive up to 6 months	Continued at 1 year	Continued at 2 years
Pakistan	45.8	48.4	68.4	56.5
ICT	91.3	57.6	74.1	55.2
Balochistan	61.1	43.9	69.5	57.3
KP	46.9	60.8	74.5	64.9
Punjab	43.7	44.3	62.9	51.2
Sindh	48.0	52.3	77.5	63.1

Source: NNS 2018

At the provincial/regional level, ICT leads with the highest rates of early initiation of breastfeeding (91.3%) and exclusive breastfeeding (57.6%), while Punjab has the lowest rates. Sindh and KP lead in continued breastfeeding at one year and two years.<sup>103</sup>

The timely introduction of complementary feeding requires significant improvement in Pakistan overall, especially in ICT (21.9%) and Balochistan (22.3%).<sup>104</sup> Provincial MICS data shows similar trends, identifying rates of exclusive breastfeeding among infants under 6 months in KP and Punjab of 57.2% and 42.1%, respectively.

Although Pakistan has laws to promote and protect breastfeeding, gaps in their effective implementation hinder their enforcement. Among the biggest challenges are inadequate

<sup>101</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

<sup>102</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

<sup>103</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

<sup>104</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, as provincial Infant Feeding Boards are not functional. Studies show that violations, such as aggressive marketing of breast milk substitutes and distribution of promotional materials, continue unabated due to weak monitoring and limited penalties.<sup>105</sup> Effective implementation of existing laws by the respective provinces would have provided children with the protection necessary to exercise their right to adequate and safe nutrition.

The quality of complementary foods is assessed on the basis of three indicators: minimum dietary diversity, minimum meal frequency and minimum acceptable diet.<sup>106</sup> Pakistan's performance on all three indicators is below an acceptable level, lower than other countries in the region and performance on these three complementary feeding indicators has declined rapidly over time. Only 14.2% of children aged between 6 and 23 months receive meals that meet minimum standards for dietary diversity, only 18.2% receive the minimum number of meals per day and only 3.6% receive a minimum acceptable diet that ensures optimal growth.<sup>107</sup>

While national and provincial nutrition strategies exist, implementation suffers from limited intersectoral coordination, inconsistent funding, and lack of localised action plans. Structural factors contributing to poor nutrition indicators include limited coverage of nutrition services, inadequate systems for monitoring and evaluation, and delays in the implementation of provincial multi-sectoral nutrition strategies.<sup>108</sup> Most nutrition initiatives in Pakistan have focused on treating acutely malnourished children, which alleviates the symptoms of malnutrition without addressing the underlying and basic causes. The nutrition sector receives relatively small, short-term and unpredictable budget allocations and is therefore heavily dependent on donors.<sup>109</sup>

### Child Food Poverty and Development

In Pakistan, 38% of young children lives in severe food poverty and 47% in moderate food poverty.<sup>110</sup> This means that those children do not reach the minimum dietary diversity for healthy growth and development. Child food poverty is harmful for children but is especially detrimental in early childhood (6-23 months). This is the time where insufficient intake of essential nutrient impact most physical growth, cognitive development and child survival.<sup>111</sup> According to UNICEF, over 54% of children under 5 years of age are the risk of poor developmental outcome due to various factors including poor nutrition, inadequate health, protection and limited learning opportunities.<sup>112</sup> Parental engagement, particularly from fathers, is often limited in Pakistan, which can adversely affect children's early development.

<sup>105</sup> Dawn. (2016, July 25). 18 months on, KP govt yet to enforce breastfeeding law. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1273063>

<sup>106</sup> World Health Organization. (n.d.). Indicator metadata registry details: Infant and young child feeding. Retrieved Dec 13, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/data/gho/indicator-metadata-registry/imr-details/7047>

<sup>107</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

<sup>108</sup> UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

<sup>109</sup> UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

<sup>110</sup> UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

<sup>111</sup> World Food Programme. (n.d.). Pakistan. <https://www.wfp.org/countries/pakistan>

<sup>112</sup> UNICEF Pakistan. (2024, April 2). More than half of young children in Pakistan are at risk of poor developmental outcomes [Post]. LinkedIn. [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/unicef-pakistan\\_in-pakistan-more-than-half-of-young-children-activity-7298591773008756736-qgEs/](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/unicef-pakistan_in-pakistan-more-than-half-of-young-children-activity-7298591773008756736-qgEs/)

## 4.4 Childhood Diseases

Burden of diseases continue to account for a high proportion of child mortality and morbidity in Pakistan and put immense pressure on the health system. According to National Institute of Health (NIH) and Provincial Health Department Punjab, the burden of preventable and infectious diseases remains alarmingly high.

Province-wise data on suspected cases in Pakistan from 2022 to 2024 shows trends and disease burdens among children across different regions.

- **Measles** remains a leading cause of death among children, with survivors often left with life-long disabilities such as blindness, deafness or brain damage. Measles cases show a consistent rise in KP and Punjab, with KP recording the highest number in 2024 (15,105 cases).
- **Malaria** continues to be a major problem in Pakistan, especially in Sindh which reported 2.9 million cases in 2023 and 2.7 million cases in 2024. Considerable amount of malaria cases were also reported from Balochistan and KP.
- **Acute Diarrhoeal Disease (AD)**, excluding cholera affect children and vulnerable populations across Pakistan, with a notable rise in the number of suspected cases in Punjab, Sindh and KP in 2024, highlighting the ongoing challenges related to water sanitation and hygiene.
- **Acute Lower Respiratory Infections (ALRI)** in children under five years of age remain a major cause of morbidity and mortality in Pakistan. Sindh reported over 495,000 suspected cases of ALRI in 2024 alone. The rise in these cases emphasises the need for improved respiratory care and preventive health measures in the healthcare facilities.
- **Tuberculosis (TB)** is a serious health issue in Pakistan. More than 545,000 suspected TB cases have been reported from Sindh in 2024, a sharp increase compared to previous years.
- While all provinces continue to report cases of **dengue fever**, the number of dengue cases in Punjab and Sindh has decreased in 2024 as compared with 2022 and 2023.
- KP has consistently reported the highest number of **Acute Flaccid Paralysis (AFP)** cases, indicative of polio and other neurological diseases, with a significant number of suspected cases recorded in 2024. Continuous efforts in immunisation campaigns and surveillance are required to control the incidence of AFP.

The number of cases remains relatively low in ICT due to the smaller population and better access to health services compared to provinces.

**Table 22: Burden of Diseases in Pakistan 2022-24<sup>113</sup>**

Region	Year	Measles	Malaria	AD (Non-Cholera)	ALRI < 5 years	Dengue	AFP	HIV/AIDS	TB
ICT	2022	34	60	13,621	3,777	266	10	3	276
	2023	44	266	18,572	218	449	10	0	615
	2024	32	100	16,299	185	238	0	32	402
Balochistan	2022	712	117,346	110,740	24,247	908	37	120	2,086
	2023	2,864	349,823	278,474	96,907	507	129	215	5,119
	2024	1,642	237,726	297,182	78,536	2,506	106	78	5,550
KP	2022	6,433	278,560	888,422	120,588	9,433	1,147	462	20,496
	2023	10,871	239,902	1,074,991	103,126	1,980	1,038	206	22,559
	2024	15,105	257,720	1,016,961	75,850	5,172	1,112	245	20,568
Punjab	2022	1,180	99,646	2,632,131	329,734	9,307			
	2023	1,513	79,957	2,525,374	171,643	5,651			
	2024	13,790	30,626	1,912,640	81,638	5,543			
Sindh	2022	2,079	583,373	876,552	133,314	7,658	197	272	68,645
	2023	2,614	2,908,383	2,002,779	525,637	6,069	502	434	428,433
	2024	5,567	2,789,543	2,087,720	495,900	5,671	486	294	545,272

Source: NIH, Primary and Secondary Healthcare Department Punjab

## Polio

Polio, or poliomyelitis, is a highly infectious viral disease primarily affecting children under five years of age. Transmitted through contaminated food and water, the virus attacks the nervous system, sometimes causing irreversible paralysis. Despite global progress in eradication, Pakistan is one of the few countries where polio remains prevalent.

**Table 23: Polio Cases in Pakistan**

Region	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
ICT	0	0	0	0	1
Balochistan	26	1	0	0	27
KP	22	0	20	4	22
Punjab	14	0	0	0	1
Sindh	22	0	0	2	23
Total	84	1	20	6	74

Source: Pakistan Polio Eradication Programme

<sup>113</sup>Reporting Period for all provinces except Punjab is 1 Jan 2022 to 10 December 2024. Reporting period for Punjab is 1 Jan 2022 to 20 December 2024.



Balochistan, Pakistan's largest and least developed province, reported 27 cases in 2024, followed by Sindh and KP with 23 and 22 cases each. The geography of infection reveals a widespread vulnerability in the country's immunisation infrastructure.<sup>114</sup>

The inability to vaccinate every child remains at the core of the problem. Approximately 60 % of the children affected in 2024 had not received a single dose of the oral polio vaccine.<sup>115</sup> The Independent Monitoring Board revealed in September 2024 that over four million planned vaccinations were missed in 2024.<sup>116</sup> Misinformation and mistrust surrounding Polio vaccines continue to pose obstacles and hamper eradication efforts. In Sindh over 43,000 cases of vaccine refusal were reported in a single month. Adding to these challenges is the unrelenting threats of violence against polio workers. Number of incidents occurred in 2024 where polio workers and their police escort were targeted both by militants and families resulted in death and injuries.<sup>117</sup>

### 4.5 WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene)

Access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is a fundamental determinant of children's health. Children are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of inadequate WASH services, which often result in preventable illnesses, stunted growth, and missed educational opportunities. Pakistan has yet to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water, especially in rural areas where improper water treatment practices are widespread.

#### Access to Drinking Water

Approximately 91% of Pakistan's population has access to basic drinking water services<sup>118</sup> (93% urban, 89% rural). Another issue is the quality of the water. Only 35% have access to water that is free from bacterial contamination.<sup>119</sup> According to MICS findings, Punjab shows the highest access to basic drinking water services (95.6%), followed by Sindh (90%) and KP (86.8%). Balochistan lags behind with 79.8%, and only 51.6% people have access to drinking water in sufficient quantities.

Table 24: Access to Improved, Basic, and Available Drinking Water by Province (%)			
Province	Use of improved drinking water sources	Use of basic drinking water services	Availability of drinking water
Balochistan	85.6	79.6	51.6
KP	90.5	86.8	77.4
Punjab	99.4	95.6	N/A
Sindh	96.0	90.4	74.3

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2024, Sindh 2018-19)

<sup>114</sup>Polio Cases in Provinces. <https://www.endpolio.com.pk/polioin-pakistan/polio-cases-in-provinces>  
<sup>115</sup>Khan, S. D. (2025, January 1). Pakistan's polio problem. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882454>  
<sup>116</sup>Khan, S. D. (2025, January 1). Pakistan's polio problem. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882454>  
<sup>117</sup>Khan, S. D. (2025, January 1). Pakistan's polio problem. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882454>  
<sup>118</sup>UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World  
<sup>119</sup>WHO & UNICEF, Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene, Estimates on the use of water, sanitation and hygiene in Pakistan, June 2019.



Awareness of water use, safety, maintenance and conservation is generally non-existent in Pakistan and water that appears clean is considered safe. At the institutional level, there is no accountability mechanism to curb inefficient water use. Key bottlenecks at the household and community level include limited availability of water and soap for hand washing, which is highly correlated with poverty. It is not uncommon for people in rural areas to spend a lot of time fetching water as they have no water supply near their homes. This task is usually undertaken by women and girls, who often have to walk more than 30 minutes through difficult terrain to fetch water for their households.<sup>120</sup>

Despite improvements in access in some provinces, the persistent disparities in availability, quality, and equity of water supply, especially in Balochistan and rural areas, highlight a critical need for targeted investments, community education, and strengthened accountability to ensure safe and sufficient drinking water for all children.

### Sanitation and Open Defecation

Approximately 71% of households have access to basic sanitation services in Pakistan (82% urban, 63% rural).<sup>121</sup> Open defecation remains a serious challenge, affecting an estimated 25 million people,<sup>122</sup> primarily in rural areas. Open defecation intensifies contamination risks, increasing the spread of waterborne pathogens and impacting children's health disproportionately.

**Table 25: Access to Sanitation Facilities by Province (%)**

Province	Use of improved sanitation facilities	Use of basic sanitation services	Open defecation
Balochistan	65.5	62.8	14.6
KP	81.2	75.3	9.5
Punjab	87.3	73.2	6.3
Sindh	65.9	58.8	24

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2024, Sindh 2018-19)

In provinces, KP leads with 75.3% access to basic sanitation services, while Sindh has the lowest access to sanitation services (58.8%). Sindh also has the highest rate of open defecation (24%). Balochistan also shows a concerning rate of open defecation (14.6%). This reflects chronic underinvestment in rural sanitation and weak implementation of provincial WASH plans.

Most people in Pakistan who do not have access to a toilet live in poor rural households or in insecure, informal urban settlements, which are the hardest to reach. In poor rural areas, open defecation is a cultural norm and accepted social behaviour. This not only poses serious health risks but also constitutes a protection concern. Women and children, in particular, face increased exposure to gender-based violence.<sup>123</sup> Sanitation service inequalities are further exacerbated by limited investments in hygiene promotion and a lack of climate-resilient sanitation infrastructure, especially in disaster-prone or flood-affected areas.

<sup>120</sup> UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

<sup>121</sup> UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World

<sup>122</sup> UNICEF. (n.d.). The State of the World's Children: Statistical Tables. Retrieved December 11, 2024, from <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/11811/file>

<sup>123</sup> UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

Hygiene Practices

Poor hygiene practices, such as not washing hands, directly contribute to the spread of infectious diseases, disproportionately affecting children. According to NNS 2018, 93.4% of women reported washing hands before eating and around 85.7% of households were observed to have soap available at the place designated for washing hands. According to MICS data, access to basic hygiene facilities varies across provinces. Punjab reports the highest access (92.1%), while Balochistan (69.3%) and Sindh (76.7%) continue to lag behind. These disparities reflect broader infrastructural and behavioural gaps, especially in rural and under-resourced areas.

Table 26: Handwashing facility with water and soap by Province	
Province	% with facility
Balochistan	69.3
KP	79.6
Punjab	92.1
Sindh	76.7

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2017-18<sup>124</sup>, Sindh 2018-19)

Hygiene challenges are particularly pronounced in schools. According to ASER 2023, 70% of government primary schools nationwide had functional toilets, while 65% had usable drinking water. In comparison, 89% of private primary schools had functional toilets and 82% had drinking water facilities. However, the presence of soap at handwashing stations and menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities remains inconsistent.

The lack of WASH facilities in schools increases the likelihood of disease outbreaks among school children. This is particularly pronounced for girls, as the lack of safe, separate toilets can discourage families from sending girls to school. The absence of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities or information on MHM practices is needed to enhance girls' school enrolment, attendance and retention.<sup>125</sup>

4.6 Disability among Children Aged 24-59 Months

The Washington Group on Disability Statistics determines functional disability in children aged 2–5 years based on six key functional domains (vision, hearing, walking, memory, self-care and communication). 12.7% of children in Pakistan have a functional disability in one of these six areas.<sup>126</sup> In Pakistan, boys are more likely to have a functional disability related to memory. For all other types of functional disability, boys and girls are equally affected.

<sup>124</sup>Note: The Punjab MICS 2024 Key Findings Report does not include data on handwashing

<sup>125</sup>UNICEF (2020). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan.

<sup>126</sup>Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

**Table 27: Prevalence of Functional Difficulties Among Children in Pakistan**

Functional Difficulty	%
Vision	1.2
Hearing	1.5
Walking	2.6
Memory	4.5
Self-care	8.5
Communication	5.6
Total	12.7

Source: NNS 2018

Children with disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities, have a higher mortality risk than their peers without disabilities. Early detection and intervention are important to improve the health and well-being of children with disabilities in Pakistan.

## 4.7 Adolescent Health and Nutrition

Adolescents, comprising 22% of Pakistan's population aged 10-19,<sup>127</sup> face unique physical, emotional, and social changes during this important developmental stage in their lives. Addressing adolescent health is important as it directly impacts their transition into healthy and productive adulthood, influencing their ability to contribute to society.

### Adolescent Mortality Rate

The adolescent mortality rate for the year 2022 is 9 deaths per 1,000 adolescents aged 10-19 years.<sup>128</sup> The 2.1% annual decline in the adolescent mortality rate from 2010 to 2022 shows moderate progress in improving adolescent health outcomes in Pakistan. The mortality rate highlights the gaps in Pakistan's healthcare infrastructure, particularly in the treatment of conditions such as infectious diseases, malnutrition, complications from early childbearing, injuries from road accidents and violence. Disparities in rural and urban healthcare and limited investment in adolescent-specific healthcare programmes continue to hinder progress.

### Nutritional Status of Adolescents

More adolescents girls in Pakistan than boys have a normal nutritional status, while boys are more likely to be underweight and obese compared to girls.<sup>129</sup> Overweight and obesity are slightly higher in urban areas for both boys and girls, with rural boys and girls having marginally lower obesity rates.

<sup>127</sup> Census 2023

<sup>128</sup> UNICEF (2024). The State of the World's Children 2024: The Future of Childhood in Changing World.

<sup>129</sup> Nutrition Wing, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, United Nations Children's Fund, Aga Khan University, and UK Aid (2019), National Nutrition Survey 2018, Government of Pakistan.

Table 28: Nutritional Status (%)		
Indicator	Boys	Girls
Normal	61.4	71.4
Underweight	21.1	11.8
Overweight	10.2	11.4
Obesity	7.7	5.5

Source: NNS 2018

Among provinces, boys have a higher prevalence of being underweight compared to girls in most regions, with Sindh showing the highest rates (30.6% for boys). In contrast, overweight is more common among girls, especially in KP (15.3%). Obesity is generally more prevalent among boys, with the highest rates observed in Balochistan (17.2%), while Sindh records the lowest obesity rates for both boys (4.7%) and girls (3.1%).

Table 29: Nutritional Status of Adolescent by Province/Region (%)						
Region	Underweight		Overweight		Obesity	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
ICT	20	8.9	8	11.2	6.5	7.3
Balochistan	12.2	12.2	16	13.6	17.2	9.1
KP	13	6.2	14.7	15.3	11.9	8.5
Punjab	18	10.5	10.5	12.1	7.5	5.5
Sindh	30.6	16.6	7.4	7.9	4.7	3.1

Source: NNS 2018

Anaemia affects a substantial proportion of adolescent girls in Pakistan, with more than half (56.6%) of adolescent girls in Pakistan are anaemic. Adolescent girls in rural areas are more likely (58.1%) to be anaemic than their counterparts in urban areas (54.2%). Adolescent girls in Pakistan also face other nutritional deficiencies, including iron deficiency, vitamin D deficiency and vitamin A deficiency, which are prevalent.

Table 30: Anaemia Among Adolescent Girls (%)	
Region	Anaemic Adolescent Girls
ICT	48.0
Balochistan	57.3
KP	48.3
Punjab	56.6
Sindh	61.9

Source: NNS 2018

The unregulated and aggressive marketing of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) targeting adolescents in Pakistan has been highlighted as a growing public health concern by UNICEF and WHO.<sup>130</sup> Evidence shows that adolescents are increasingly exposed to persuasive advertising that promotes unhealthy dietary choices, contributing to rising rates of overweight, obesity, and diet-related non-communicable diseases.<sup>131</sup> Pakistan Adolescent Nutrition Strategy 2020-2025 also recognises the widespread marketing and easy availability of unhealthy foods as a major barrier to improving adolescent nutrition.<sup>132</sup> In order to protect adolescents' rights to a healthy diet, there is an urgent need for a robust legal framework in Pakistan that regulates the marketing of UPFs and SSBs to children and adolescents across all media platforms and ensure clear labelling of food products, and restricts the sale and promotion of unhealthy foods in and around schools.

### Adolescents Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH)

Many adolescents in Pakistan are at risk of experiencing poor reproductive health, which is associated with adverse consequences such as early childbearing and parenthood, pregnancy complications, and maternal death and disability. For instance, about one in five married adolescent women aged 15–19 years in Pakistan have begun childbearing,<sup>133</sup> often without the support of policies and programmes that would enable them to make informed and voluntary decisions to protect their health and exercise their reproductive rights.

According to PDHS 2017-18, an estimated 617,000 pregnancies take place among adolescent women aged 15–19 years in Pakistan each year. Some 36% of these pregnancies are unintended, meaning that they were wanted later or not at all. More than half (58%) of unintended pregnancies among these adolescents end in abortion. Additionally, 30% end in birth and 12% result in miscarriage or stillbirth. One-third (34%) of live births to mother's under age 20 had a low birth weight compared with one-fifth (21%) of births to mothers age 20-34. Provincial MICS data highlight childbearing among women aged 20–24 who had a live birth before age 18. It reveals that early pregnancy rates are higher in rural areas.

Table 31: Child Bearing		
Percentage of women age 20-24 years who have had a live birth before age 18		
	Urban	Rural
Balochistan	12	13
KP	10	12
Punjab	11	13
Sindh	10	14

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2017-18<sup>134</sup>, Sindh 2018-19)

<sup>130</sup>World Health Organization (WHO) & United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2023). Protecting children from the harmful impact of food marketing: A toolkit for countries.

<sup>131</sup>World Health Organization (WHO) & United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2023). Protecting children from the harmful impact of food marketing: A toolkit for countries.

<sup>132</sup>United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2021). Pakistan Adolescent Nutrition Strategy 2020–2025. <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/2846/file/Pakistan%20Adolescent%20Nutrition%20Strategy.pdf>

<sup>133</sup>National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS) [Pakistan], & ICF. (2019). Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18. Islamabad, Pakistan, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: NIPS and ICF.

<sup>134</sup>Note: The Punjab MICS 2024 Key Findings Report does not include data on child rearing practices.

Access to appropriate contraceptive methods is critical to prevent adolescent pregnancy and its related consequences, allowing adolescents to transition into adulthood with the ability to plan their pregnancies and live healthy and productive lives. According to UNICEF, a mere 11% of adolescents aged 15–19 report making informed decisions about their reproductive health (2017–2023). This highlights a widespread lack of knowledge and autonomy among young people regarding their sexual and reproductive rights. Social norms, lack of awareness, and the absence of adolescent friendly health services contribute to this gap. Also, only 6% of adolescents have their demand for family planning satisfied using modern contraceptive methods. This low percentage highlights gaps in the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of contraceptive services for young people.

**Table 32: Family Planning Indicators Among Married Adolescent Girls (15–19 Years) (%)**

Region	Demand Satisfied (Modern Methods)	Unmet Need	% of Demand for Modern Methods of Family Planning Satisfied
Balochistan	16	37	7
KP	30	29	13
Punjab	30	15	7
Sindh	19	21	5

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019–20, KP 2019, Punjab 2017–18<sup>135</sup>, Sindh 2018–19)

Despite making up a significant portion of the population, adolescents in Pakistan are underserved in the public health system. The absence of adolescent-friendly health services in public facilities means that most adolescents, particularly girls, do not receive preventive care, SRH information, or mental health support — a critical gap given their growing share of the population. In Pakistan, only 44% of pregnant adolescents aged 15–19 received the recommended four antenatal care visits, and 76% of adolescent births were attended by a skilled birth attendant (2017–2023). Skilled birth attendants are necessary for ensuring safe delivery and preventing maternal and neonatal complications. Regular antenatal care is critical for monitoring pregnancy, preventing complications, and ensuring safe delivery. The low percentage indicates a lack of adolescent-specific maternal healthcare services and barriers such as socio-cultural constraints and financial limitations.

## Mental Health

According to the WHO, around 14% of adolescents aged 10–19 worldwide suffer from mental health problems, with anxiety and depression being the most common disorders.<sup>136</sup> UNICEF also reports that about one in seven adolescents worldwide is affected by mental disorders. Mental health is an increasingly pressing issue in Pakistan; however, data remains limited, primarily because individuals affected by mental health challenges are often unaware of their condition or their cases go unreported. A study conducted by Ghazal (2022) of 400 high school students aged 15–18 found that 53% of participants exhibited symptoms of anxiety and depression.

MICS findings reveal cases of anxiety and depression among children however causes of anxiety and depression were not further investigated.

<sup>135</sup> Note: The Punjab MICS 2024 Key Findings Report does not include data on contraceptive

<sup>136</sup> World Health Organization. (n.d.). Adolescent mental health. Retrieved December 14, 2024, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>

Table 33: Mental Health Problems (children aged 5-17) (%)		
Region	Anxiety	Depression
Balochistan	5.2	4.4
KP	7	5.3
Punjab	3.7	2.7
Sindh	4	3.2

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2017-18<sup>137</sup>, Sindh 2018-19)

The child labour surveys conducted by Punjab and KP show that working children, especially those in hazardous environments, are more prone to mental health problems compared to their non-working peers. According to the Punjab Child Labour Survey 2018–2019 and the KP Child Labour Survey 2022, all children aged 10 to 17 years have reported mental health problems, but those engaged in child labour and hazardous work have higher rates of mental health problems.

Table 34: Mental Health Issues (Punjab) (%)		
10-14 Years	Not in child Labour	11
	In child labour	16.20
15-17 Years	Adolescents not in hazardous work	16.30
	Adolescents in hazardous work	23.60

Source: Punjab Child Labour Survey 2018-2019

Table 35: Mental Health Issues (KP) (%)		
10-17 Years	Not in child Labour	16
	In child labour	31.80

Source: KP Child Labour Survey 2022

Suicide is a leading cause of death among adolescents globally, ranking as the third leading cause for those aged 15–29 (WHO). In Pakistan, 289 suicides among children and adolescents were reported between 2019 and 2020, with an almost equal gender distribution, particularly in late adolescence, although many cases are likely to go unreported.<sup>138</sup>

Schools can play an important role in promoting wellbeing and preventing and responding to mental health issues such as violence, bullying, suicide and self-harming behaviour. Addressing suicide in schools remains taboo due to societal stigma, fear of reputational harm, and inadequate preparedness, and there is no one single effective strategy to address suicide risk in Pakistan.<sup>139</sup> Some private and charity-run schools have introduced programmes that focus on social-emotional learning, teacher training and counselling services,<sup>140</sup> but, better implementation and the development of clear strategies are urgently needed to prevent and address mental health crises, including suicide and self-harm.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Note: The Punjab MICS 2024 Key Findings Report does not include data on mental health

<sup>138</sup> Alam, Z. K. (2024, December 23). Suicidal behaviour. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1880474/suicidal-behaviour>

<sup>139</sup> Alam, Z. K. (2024, December 23). Suicidal behaviour. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1880474/suicidal-behaviour>

<sup>140</sup> Alam, Z. K. (2024, December 23). Suicidal behaviour. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1880474/suicidal-behaviour>

<sup>141</sup> Alam, Z. K. (2024, December 23). Suicidal behaviour. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1880474/suicidal-behaviour>



## 4.8 Resource Allocation for Health<sup>142</sup>

The health budgets of Pakistan's federal and provincial governments for 2024-25 reveal different priorities that reflect the broader socio-economic and political dynamics of each region. There is no separately allocated health budget for children in Pakistan.

### Federal Budget

The federal government's health budget shows that the overall health budget has increased from previous years, however, its share of the federal budget for development funds decreased from 2.3% in 2021-22 to 1.7% in 2024-25 whereas the current health budget remained stagnant at 0.2%.<sup>143</sup> 77% of the current health budget is allocated to medical equipment, and 52% is allocated to hospital services. This reflects that the federal government is prioritising infrastructure expansion.

Table 36: Health Budget 2024-25 (in millions)					
Position	Federal	Sindh	Punjab	KP	Balochistan
Total Health Budget	56,356	321,712	371,806	212,294	77,167
Current Budget- Health (%)	49.99	90.22	73.09	83.46	74.03
Development Budget- Health (%)	50.01	9.78	26.91	16.54	25.97

Source: CPDI

Despite nominal increases in health budgets, lack of child-specific allocations, poor budget utilisation, and weak coordination between planning and service delivery units remain systemic constraints. Realisation of allocated funds, especially in Balochistan, is frequently hindered by administrative delays and low absorption capacity.

### Sindh

There has been a major increase in Sindh health budget for 2024-25. The current budget prioritises public health services, allocating 64% to initiatives such as anti-malaria, anti-tuberculosis and immunisation programmes. In the development budget, 36% is allocated to hospital services and 64% to public health services. Budget volatility is a potential challenge in Sindh, as was evident in 2023-24 when development budget estimates were revised downwards from PKR 19,739 million to PKR 5,058 million.

### Punjab

Punjab's health budgets reflect a steady increase in current allocations, with 76% directed towards hospital services. In contrast, 96% of the development budget is allocated to public health services, highlighting a predominantly hospital-centric approach. However, the overall share of health in Punjab's total budget has declined from 11% in 2021–22 to 8% in 2024–25 in the current budget. Similarly, the share of the development budget has decreased from 17% to 14% over the same period, indicating a shift in priorities away from healthcare in the post-pandemic period.

<sup>142</sup>Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (2024). Trends in Health Budget Allocations in Pakistan. <https://cpdi-pakistan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Health-Budget-Allocation-Briefing-Paper-compressed.pdf>

<sup>143</sup>Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI). (2024). Health budget allocation briefing paper 2024–25. [https://cpdi-pakistan.org/api/download/v1734190357/Health\\_Budget\\_Allocation\\_Briefing\\_Paper\\_compressed\\_55b9274ebe.pdf](https://cpdi-pakistan.org/api/download/v1734190357/Health_Budget_Allocation_Briefing_Paper_compressed_55b9274ebe.pdf)



### Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

KP health budgets show some increase in both current and development spending with 64% of the current budget is allocated to hospital services and 69% of the development budget allocated to public health initiatives. This dual focus on curative and preventative care highlights a strategic approach to improving accessibility and healthcare infrastructure.

### Balochistan

Balochistan has allocated the entire development budget for 2024-25 for public health services, reflecting a strong focus on the expansion of health facilities. The current budget has also shown increase increasing from PKR 285,850 million in 2021-22 to PKR 609,057 million in 2024-25. However, the share of the health sector in the total provincial budget has remained relatively stagnant, ranging between 9-10% for the current budget and between 4 and 6% for the development budget. Balochistan also faces the question of whether it will be able to realise the budget allocations in full, given the scarcity of resources and administrative challenges in the past.

## 4.9 Legal Framework Supporting the Children's Right to Survival

Articles 25, 35, and 38 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, establish equal protection under the law and mandate the state to ensure the welfare of mothers and children. At the provincial level, all provinces and ICT have laws dealing with promotion of breastfeeding and regulate the marketing of breast milk substitutes, including:

- Protection of Breast-Feeding and Child Nutrition Ordinance, 2002 (Adopted by Punjab also in 2012 with some amendments)
- Balochistan Protection and Promotion of Breast-Feeding and Child Nutrition Act, 2014
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Protection of Breast-Feeding and Child Nutrition Act, 2015
- Sindh Protection and Promotion of Breast-Feeding and Child Nutrition Act, 2023

In 2014, the Government of Punjab enacted the Punjab Reproductive, Maternal, Neonatal, and Child Health Authority Act, focusing on improving maternal, neonatal, and child health services. Other provinces have also taken steps to enhance reproductive healthcare: Sindh and Balochistan in 2019 and KP in 2020, have passed their respective Reproductive Healthcare Rights Acts.

The Federal government passed the ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act in 2020. All provinces have also enacted legislation specifically addressing the rights and empowerment of persons with disabilities: KP in 2012, Balochistan in 2017, Sindh in 2018, and Punjab in 2022.

Federal and provincial governments have also enacted mental health laws. The federal government first passed the Mental Health Ordinance in 2001. Post 18th Constitutional amendment in 2010, Sindh enacted the Mental Health law in 2013, followed by Punjab in 2014, KP in 2017, and Balochistan in 2019. These laws aim to improve mental healthcare access and quality, including provisions for community-based care and the establishment of mental health facilities.

All provinces have enacted health commission laws to set up regulatory bodies. Punjab passed it in 2010, Sindh in 2013, KP in 2015 and Balochistan in 2019. These commissions are responsible for monitoring health standards, protecting patients' rights, ensuring quality of services and safeguarding the interests of vulnerable populations, including children.<sup>144</sup>

## 4.10 Healthcare Infrastructure and Service Delivery Mechanisms

Pakistan's healthcare system operates within a multi-tiered framework comprising public and private facilities that cater to the diverse needs of the population. The system is divided into several levels, with each level providing specialised services.

### Primary Healthcare

At the grassroots level, Basic Health Units (BHUs), located primarily in rural areas, serve as the first point of contact for communities. They provide immunisations, maternal and child health (MCH) services, and treatment for common illnesses. Rural Health Centres (RHCs) offer a broader range of services, including minor surgeries and emergency care, and act as referral centres for BHUs in underserved regions.

### Secondary Healthcare

At the secondary level, Tehsil Headquarters Hospitals (THQs) deliver outpatient and inpatient care, emergency services, and diagnostic support at the sub-district level. District Headquarters Hospitals (DHQs), situated in district capitals, provide specialised services, including surgery, paediatrics, and gynaecology, and offer critical support to primary healthcare facilities.

### Tertiary Healthcare

Tertiary care facilities, including teaching hospitals in major cities, provide advanced medical care, such as paediatric surgery, cancer treatment, and other specialised services, catering to complex healthcare needs.

Table 37: Types of Health Facilities available in Pakistan			
Province	Primary Level	Secondary Level	Tertiary Level
Sindh	1,824	253	14
Punjab	2,835	652	22
KP	2,281	381	33
Balochistan	1,089	198	9
ICT	31	3	2
Total	8,060	1,487	80

Source: National Institute of Health (2024)

<sup>144</sup>Policy and Law- Health – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/health-in-pakistan/policy-and-law-health/>

## Private Sector Contributions

The private sector plays an important role in healthcare delivery, predominantly in urban centres. Private hospitals and clinics, accounting for a substantial share of healthcare services, provide a range of care options but are often prohibitively expensive for lower-income populations. Private sector is poorly regulated, often excludes marginalised children, and contributes to out-of-pocket expenditure burdens. Numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charity-run hospitals offer free or low-cost care, focusing on vulnerable groups, including children. However, these services are limited in reach and only accessible to a small portion of the population.

## Key Challenges

Pakistan faces major challenges in terms of healthcare infrastructure and service delivery mechanisms. The institutional capacity of the healthcare system is inadequate to effectively manage the high disease burden. This is compounded by a shortage of staff, inadequate training of health personnel and a persistent lack of financial resources. The situation is particularly bad in paediatric care. Although almost half of Pakistan's population is under the age of 18, there are limited dedicated paediatric wards in every hospital. Moreover, paediatric care is usually only provided for children up to the age of 12 or 13. After that, they are often treated as adults, without consideration for their particular physiological and emotional needs. For children with disabilities, access to appropriate health services is even more difficult and hospital lack specialised facilities, trained professionals and adaptive equipment. Health services for transgender children are also virtually non-existent, further marginalising an already vulnerable group.

## 4.11 Climate Change and Children

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines “Climate Change” as a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods.<sup>145</sup>

UNICEF states that children in Pakistan are at an “extremely high risk” of experiencing the impact of climate change.<sup>146</sup> UNICEF 2021 Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI) ranks Pakistan 14 out of 163 countries, in terms of vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change.<sup>147</sup> The smog in Punjab, heat waves all across, the north's melting glaciers, and widespread floods illustrate a country under siege from environmental forces directly have an impact on the lives of children.<sup>148</sup>

In recent years, Pakistan experienced unprecedented floods in 2022 directly linked to climate change, affecting 33 million people, half of whom were children. According to GAVI, the floods not only led to the immediate displacement of millions of people, but also had long-term consequences: 44% of children suffered from stunted growth due to insufficient nutrition and inadequate medical care in the aftermath. The floods also had a severe impact on education. The destruction of 27,000 schools disrupted access for around 2 million children, which led to higher rates of child labour in flood-affected areas according to Save the Children report (2022).<sup>149</sup>

<sup>145</sup> UNFCCC.(n.d), Article 1 Definitions. <https://unfccc.int/resource/ccsites/zimbabwe/conven/text/art01.htm>

<sup>146</sup> UNICEF (2020), Country Office Report, <https://www.unicef.org/media/102551/file/Pakistan-2020-COAR.pdf>

<sup>147</sup> UNICEF (2021) Climate Changed Child, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-changed-child>

<sup>148</sup> Siddiqui, Q. U. A. (2025, January 1). A climate reckoning. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882268>

<sup>149</sup> Digital, S. (n.d.). Pakistan floods 2022 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment | Save the Children's Resource Centre. Save the Children's Resource Centre. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/pakistan-floods-2022-multi-sectoral-needs-assessment/>

Pakistan experienced extreme heat-waves in the months of May and June 2024 and temperatures were 4-6°C above the global average.<sup>150</sup> In Punjab, schools were closed as a safety measure, affecting 52% of the country's total student population in pre-primary, primary and secondary education.

Constant exposure to air pollutants increases the risk of respiratory diseases among children. For instance, the release of Nitrogen Oxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) gas<sup>151</sup> from vehicles and from non-renewable cooking fuels within households is a common cause of asthma among young children in Pakistan. These pollutants have been linked to prevalence of anaemia in under-five, stunting, infant mortality and underage deaths (12-59 months) in Pakistan, especially amongst children living in poor socio-economic conditions.<sup>152</sup>

Data released by State of Global Air Report (SOGA) 2021<sup>153</sup> states that 68,100 children in Pakistan die before the age of five years due exposure to air pollution. 98% of children in Pakistan are exposed to PM<sub>2.5</sub> levels that far exceed the regulatory health guidelines. Due to severe smog conditions in Punjab in 2024, when the air quality index (AQI) in Lahore reached hazardous levels, exceeding 1,000 in some areas, schools and colleges in 18 districts were closed from November 7-17 Nov 2024. The school closure resulted in a disruption of education for nearly 16 million children in Punjab.

### Legal and Institutional Framework

Pakistan has made some progress in addressing climate change through a framework of policies, laws, and institutional mechanisms. Constitutional provisions such as Articles 9 and 14 ensure the right to life and dignity, and the 26th Constitutional Amendment, introduced in October 2024, added Article 9A, recognising the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a fundamental right. The Pakistan Climate Change Act, 2017, established the Climate Change Council and Fund to support mitigation and adaptation projects. Provincial environmental protection acts in Punjab, Sindh, KP, and Balochistan further provide mechanisms for sustainable development and pollution control. However, these frameworks lack a strong focus on children, leaving gaps in addressing the specific vulnerabilities and needs of children affected by climate change. Institutions like the Ministry of Climate Change, the Pakistan Environmental Protection Agency, and provincial environmental agencies are yet to mainstream child-centred approaches in their climate actions.

<sup>150</sup> Save the Children International | More than half of Pakistan's school age children will be out of school due to extreme heat. (n.d.). Save the Children International. <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/more-half-pakistan-s-school-age-children-will-be-out-school-due-extreme-heat>

<sup>151</sup> Junaidi, I. (2024, July 1). Over 68,000 children under five died due to air pollution in 2021: report. DAWN.COM. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1842989>

<sup>152</sup> Naz S, Page A, Agho KE. Household air pollution from use of cooking fuel and under-five mortality: The role of breastfeeding status and kitchen location in Pakistan. PLoS One. 2017 Mar 9;12(3):e0173256. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0173256. PMID: 28278260; PMCID: PMC5344381.

<sup>153</sup> SOGA (2021), <https://www.stateofglobalair.org/resources/report/state-global-air-report-2024>

## 4.12 Recommendations

Pakistan needs to adopt comprehensive, child-centred, inclusive policies and programmes that target healthcare care, nutrition and climate resilience, improve governance and address systemic inefficiencies to protect children and promote healthy lives.

### Improving Child Healthcare Services and Expand Immunisation Coverage

- Expand access to skilled birth attendants and neonatal care units, particularly in rural areas, to reduce neonatal mortality rates.
- Prioritise investments in healthcare infrastructure upgradation to combat preventable diseases by strengthening mother and child centres, BHUs, and primary healthcare services like diarrhoea, pneumonia, and malaria. Equip rural health centres with essential medicines, diagnostic tools, and ensure availability of trained personnel.
- Increasing the number of paediatric wards, numbers of beds and specialised units within general hospitals.
- Strengthen immunisation programmes to address drop-off rates for vaccines like DTP3 and Polio3 and expand coverage to children up to 5 years of age as per the National Immunization Policy. There is a strong need to improve cold chain infrastructure and conduct community mobilisation campaigns to combat vaccine hesitancy.
- Develop and scale up satellite healthcare centres and mobile clinics to extend cost-effective and accessible healthcare.

### Addressing Malnutrition and Micronutrient Deficiencies

- Scale up programmes addressing the protracted malnutrition, such as the prevention and management of wasting, stunting reduction, school health and nutrition initiatives, and support community-based health, nutrition and care solutions.
- Scale up the maternal and adolescent nutrition programmes targeting underweight and anaemic women, with a focus on improving awareness on nutritional, ensuring access to health safe and affordable diet and services through social protection and food systems actions, as well as addressing the deep rooted gender and sociocultural issues.
- Conduct awareness campaigns and community engagement on optimal infant and young child feeding practices, involving local influencers to build trust and improve participation.
- Implement the costed multisectoral national nutrition action plan, and the ECD framework approved by the MoNHR&C and MoPD&SI
- Implementation of nurturing care and early stimulation for survival through parenting programmes.
- Sustaining the Benazir Nashunoma Programme (BNP) to ensure mothers, children and adolescent girls unable to afford have access to nutrition and other basic social services.

### **Expanding WASH Infrastructure**

- Invest in rural water infrastructure, including filtration plants and boreholes, to reduce reliance on unsafe water sources. Make investments in sanitation facilities in schools and public spaces, especially for adolescent girls.
- Conduct hygiene promotion campaigns targeting children and caregivers, focusing on handwashing and cleaning habits.

### **Ensure Adolescents are Treated as Children in Healthcare Systems**

- Amend healthcare policies and protocols to explicitly recognise and treat adolescents under 18 as children, ensuring they receive appropriate care and protections.
- Introduce mechanisms for disaggregated data collection within the health system to identify gaps in adolescent health services and inform targeted interventions.

### **Mental Health Support**

- Develop national mental health programmes focusing on children and adolescents. Appoint counsellors in all schools and child psychologists in all hospitals.
- Schools must address self-harm and suicidal behaviour directly, fostering protective factors such as self-esteem and positive relationships, while tackling risk factors such as bullying, violence, and academic stress. Global best practices recommend strategies such as teacher training, the development of life skills, identifying students at risk, creating safety plans, and connecting students with professional resources.

### **Prioritise Prevention Over Treatment**

- Invest in preventive health and nutrition care programmes and conduct awareness campaigns on preventive health and nutrition practices, including the importance of early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding, immunisation, safe water use, and proper sanitation. Investing in preventive healthcare can reduce the financial and resource burden on Pakistan's healthcare system.
- Operationalise Infant Feeding Boards and Committees in each province to promote breastfeeding practices. This includes regular inspections of healthcare facilities and strict penalties for violations of breastfeeding laws.
- Enhance newborn screening for early detection of metabolic, genetic and other congenital disorders to ensure timely and accurate diagnosis and treatment.
- Raise awareness among healthcare providers and parents about the importance of newborn screening.

### **Strengthening Climate Resilience and Disaster Preparedness**

- Prioritise climate-resilient school infrastructure (e.g., flood-proofing, heat-resistant buildings) to prevent health risks during disasters, paired with digital learning systems to sustain education and psychosocial support during disruptions.
- Incorporate climate change topics into the school curriculum across all grades to raise awareness of its impact on health, livelihoods, and ecosystems.

- Train communities on climate-smart agricultural practices, water conservation, and disaster risk reduction strategies. Enhance early warning systems with timely dissemination of alerts to vulnerable populations.
- Implement a system to ensure disaster-affected populations receive immediate relief, including WASH services, healthcare, and psychological counselling. Prioritise rebuilding essential infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and water systems in disaster-hit areas.
- Invest in clean energy infrastructure, including solar, wind, and hydropower projects. Provide subsidies for renewable energy adoption at the community level to reduce dependence on unsustainable fuels.
- Expand urban resilience by developing urban forests, parks, and rooftop gardens to mitigate the urban heat island effect and improve air quality.





## 5. Children's Right to Protection

Every child has an inherent right to a life free from violence, fear, neglect, exploitation and abuse. The protection of children from all forms of violence is a fundamental right guaranteed by international treaties and standards. As one of the main pillars of the UNCRC, the Convention obliges states to protect children from all forms of harm. Despite efforts at various levels, children in Pakistan remain vulnerable to various forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Children who are exposed to or witness violence can suffer acute and long-term damage to their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. *This chapter examines the most pressing challenges affecting the safety and well-being of children in Pakistan.*

### 5.1 Birth Registration

An essential but often overlooked aspect of child protection is birth registration, the official and universal documentation of a child's birth by the government. This process legally recognises the existence and identity of a child and is often a prerequisite for accessing fundamental rights and services such as healthcare, education and social protection. Additionally, birth registration serves as a safeguard against child rights violations, including child marriage, underage employment and juvenile justice, as laws dealing with these issues cannot be effectively enforced without verified proof of age.<sup>154</sup> Timely birth registration is essential to prevent statelessness and ensure that displaced, separated, or undocumented children do not fall through administrative gaps, reducing their vulnerability to exploitation, trafficking, and exclusion. Birth records are particularly important for family tracing and reunification when children are separated from caregivers due to conflict, natural disasters, migration, or other forms of displacement. Beyond individual rights, birth registration plays a crucial role in national planning and governance. It contributes to the generation of vital statistics that enable governments to track population dynamics, allocate resources efficiently and monitor progress in human development through integrated Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems.<sup>155</sup>

#### Birth Registration Rates

The number of unregistered children in Pakistan remains alarmingly high as birth registration rates are low across the country. According to PDHS 2017-18, the national birth registration rate for children under the age of five is 42.2%, with significant variation between provinces. ICT reports the highest registration rate at 82.4%, followed by Punjab at 57.8%. In contrast, Sindh and Balochistan lag behind, while KP has the lowest rate at 18.8%. In all provinces, birth registration rates in urban areas are consistently higher than in rural areas.

<sup>154</sup> UNICEF USA. (n.d.). Birth registration: Ensuring every child is counted. Retrieved November 18, 2024, from <https://www.unicefusa.org/what-unicef-does/childrens-protection/birth-registration>

<sup>155</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). Civil registration and vital statistics.

Table 38: Birth Registration Rates in Pakistan by Urban and Rural Areas (%)			
Region	Total	Urban	Rural
National	42.2	60.3	33.7
ICT	82.4		
Balochistan	37.8	46	34
KP	18.8	30.4	16.3
Punjab	57.8	70.5	51.7
Sindh	27.6	53.8	6.9

Source: PDHS 2017-18

More recent data on birth registration comes from the MICS, which also provides a gender-disaggregated perspective. Similar to the PDHS findings, Punjab continues to lead with the highest birth registration rates, while KP remains the lowest. Notably, there is no significant disparity in birth registration rates between male and female children across provinces. However, while the MICS indicates improvements in registration rates, it is important to note that the methodologies of MICS and PDHS differ, which may affect the comparability of results.<sup>156</sup> Despite these discrepancies, Punjab offers encouraging progress, with registration rates rising from 75.3% (MICS 2017–18) to 79.9% in 2024 (NICS 2024).

Table 39: Birth Registration Rates by Gender in Pakistan (%)			
Provinces	Total	Male	Female
Balochistan	44.1	44.2	44.1
KP	29.5	29.7	29.3
Punjab	79.9	80.1	79.7
Sindh	34.0	34.4	33.6

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2024, Sindh 2018-19)

Punjab's relatively higher performance correlates with its extensive network of 2,146 functional Union Councils and 153 e-Khidmat centers facilitating registration.<sup>157</sup> In contrast, Balochistan's sparse population density (35 persons/km<sup>2</sup>) and limited government presence leave 62% of villages without accessible registration points.<sup>158</sup> KP's challenges are further exacerbated by security constraints in the former FATA regions, where many facilities face operational limitations due to inadequate infrastructure, staffing shortages, and restricted government outreach. Additionally, Punjab's Digital Birth Registration initiative, integrated with 1,200 health facilities since 2021, accounts for 38% of its registrations.<sup>159</sup> Sindh's parallel system covers only 17% of health centers, while Balochistan and KP lack comparable digital infrastructure. This

<sup>156</sup>Marked discrepancies exist between MICS and PDHS data due to differences in the surveys' methodologies. MICS survey interviews are carried out exclusively with mothers and primary caregivers for the indicator on birth registration, while PDHS interviews are undertaken with any household respondent.

<sup>157</sup>Punjab Information Technology Board. (2022). e-Khidmat Center app facilitates citizens on the move [Press release]. <https://pitb.gov.pk/node/8088>

<sup>158</sup>Punjab Economic Research Institute. (2019). Tracking the invisibles: Identifying birth registration barriers in Punjab (Report No. 2019-BR-01), p. 23. <https://peri.punjab.gov.pk>

<sup>159</sup>United Nations Children's Fund. (2023). Summative evaluation of Digital Birth Registration programme (2017-2021), p. 38. <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/documents/summative-evaluation-digital-birth-registration-programme-2017-2021>

technological gap creates an urban-rural divide even within provinces - evident in Sindh's 53.8% urban vs 6.9% rural registration.<sup>160</sup>

## Legal and Institutional Framework

The legal framework for birth registration in Pakistan consists of national and provincial laws. The Birth, Marriage, and Death Registration Act, 1886, established the basis for civil registration and required provincial governments to maintain certified records of births and deaths. The NADRA Ordinance 2000 authorises NADRA to oversee civil registration nationwide. At the provincial level, birth registration is administered through local government laws, with local union councils acting as the primary registration bodies.

In Pakistan, the birth registration process involves multiple stages and authorities, with different documents being issued at each stage to formalise a child's legal identity. When parents register the birth of their child with the local Union Council (UC), they receive a birth certificate. This certificate serves as the first and most important proof of a child's birth and contains important details such as the child's name, date and place of birth and the parents' details.<sup>161</sup> *In areas where there are no Union Councils, such as cantonment areas, the birth registration procedure is carried out by the respective Cantonment Boards or Municipal Corporations, which issue the corresponding certificates.* Under the Cantonments Ordinance, 2002, these bodies are federally mandated to perform civil registration functions across all military-administered areas of the country.

Once the birth certificate is issued, the information is forwarded to the NADRA for digital processing. NADRA then issues a Child Registration Certificate (CRC), commonly referred to as a B-form.<sup>162</sup> While the birth certificate is primarily a local record, the CRC gives the child a formal national identity. The CRC is part of Pakistan's centralised digital identity management system and serves as the primary document for accessing essential national services including school admissions, healthcare, social welfare programmes, passport issuance, and applying for a Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC). In 2024, NADRA issued 11,867,901 Child Registration Certificates (CRCs), with Punjab recording the highest number at 4,454,937, followed by Sindh at 3,698,670.<sup>163</sup>

**Table 40: Number of Child Registration Certificates Issued in 2024 (1 Jan 2024 – 31 Dec 2024)**

Region	Male	Female	Transgender	Total
Total	6,012,438	5,855,463	0	11,867,901
ICT	44,055	42,894	0	86,949
Balochistan	422,447	406,948	0	829,395
KP	1,393,342	1,404,608	0	2,797,950
Punjab	2,275,366	2,179,571	0	4,454,937
Sindh	1,877,228	1,821,442	0	3,698,670

Source: NADRA

<sup>160</sup> Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18, Table 12.4, p. 214. Government of Pakistan. <https://www.pbs.gov.pk>

<sup>161</sup> Legalversity. (n.d.). How to Obtain Birth Certificate from Union Council in Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://legalversity.com/how-to-obtain-birth-certificate-from-union-council-in-pakistan>

<sup>162</sup> National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). (n.d.). Child Registration Certificate (CRC). Retrieved from <https://www.nadra.gov.pk/child-registration-certificate-crc/>

<sup>163</sup> National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA). (2025, February). Request for data on birth registration. Government of Pakistan.

NADRA's 2024 data shows 11.87 million child registration certificates issued, significantly higher than Pakistan's estimated 6.24 million annual births. This discrepancy likely reflects delayed registrations. The total figures suggest NADRA's data captures cumulative registrations over multiple years, not just births occurring in 2024.

### CRVS and Birth Registration

Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) is an integrated system for the continuous, permanent and universal recording of vital events such as births, deaths, marriages and divorces in accordance with national laws.<sup>164</sup> Pakistan does not systematically generate disaggregated vital statistics from civil registration data due to incomplete coverage and gaps in data integration. Instead, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) relies on national surveys such as the PDHS and MICS to estimate vital statistics.

An assessment conducted by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms (MoPDR) in 2013 revealed significant weaknesses in the birth and death registration systems and led to the establishment of the National CRVS Steering and Coordination Committee in 2014 and a Technical Support Unit in 2017 to improve the implementation of the CRVS. Efforts to strengthen Pakistan's CRVS system have accelerated in recent years. Initiatives such as the Digital Birth Registration (DBR) programme are modernising the process through mobile applications and web-based dashboard.<sup>165</sup> These advances have improved data collection, expanded coverage in remote areas of Punjab and Sindh, and integrated civil registration with NADRA's national databases.<sup>166</sup>

In October 2024, NADRA launched the CRVS Inception Plan to be implemented in three phases over two years to streamline the registration of births, marriages, divorces and deaths.<sup>167</sup> This initiative will also facilitate data integration between provincial and federal authorities. In Phase I, the Punjab Health Information System Delivery Unit (HISDU) and the Federal Directorate of Immunisation (FDI) will be integrated with NADRA, with birth and death notifications being introduced in 10 hospitals and SMS alerts being implemented for the issuance of birth certificates. In Phase II, the system will be expanded to 25% of public healthcare facilities nationwide. Finally, in Phase III, coverage will be extended to 90% of healthcare facilities, with all Town Committees and Union Councils fully included. Moreover, Punjab has introduced e-Khidmat centres to facilitate access to civil registration services, providing birth, marriage and death certificates under one roof.<sup>168</sup>

<sup>164</sup> UNICEF (2022). Situation Analysis Update: Children in Pakistan August 2020

<sup>165</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2023). Summative Evaluation of Digital Birth Registration Programme (2017-2021). Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/documents/summative-evaluation-digital-birth-registration-programme-2017-2021>

<sup>166</sup> Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives. (n.d.). About CRVS in Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://www.pc.gov.pk/web/crvs/crvsabout>

<sup>167</sup> National Database and Registration Authority. (2024, October 9). NADRA launches Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) inception plan. Government of Pakistan. <https://www.nadra.gov.pk/nadra-launches-civil-registration-and-vital-statistics-crvs-inception-plan/>

<sup>168</sup> Punjab Information Technology Board. (2022, March 9). e-Khidmat Center app facilitates citizens on the move. Government of Punjab. <https://pitb.gov.pk/node/8088>

### NCRC Efforts to Improve Birth Registration

In 2024, NCRC played a key role in promoting birth registration reforms in Pakistan. NCRC successfully lobbied in Sindh to extend the fee waiver for late registrations from 60 days to one year, making birth registration more accessible to families. NCRC's lobbying efforts also led to the formation of an inter-ministerial committee to oversee birth registration across the country. It also engaged with provincial Chief Ministers and Chief Secretaries, urging coordinated action to address systemic gaps and improve accessibility.

*Source: NCRC*

### Gaps and Challenges

Pakistan's birth registration system faces structural and operational challenges that limit universal coverage. Accessibility remains a major concern, particularly in rural and remote areas, where infrastructure is weak and service delivery is inconsistent.<sup>169</sup> Economic constraints, including indirect costs, travel expenses, and penalties for late registration, deter many low-income families from obtaining birth certificates.<sup>170</sup> Marginalised populations, such as ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and undocumented communities, face additional administrative hurdles, leaving large numbers of children unregistered.<sup>171</sup> Low public awareness further limits utilisation of available services, particularly in underdeveloped regions.<sup>172</sup>

In late 2024, UNICEF in collaboration with NCRC supported provincial and territorial Local Government Departments in undertaking a scoping exercise to map systemic bottlenecks across seven regions focusing on key policy issues such as procedural simplification and fee waivers. The findings revealed critical weaknesses: poor infrastructure, capacity constraints among service delivery staff, and weak coordination between Local Government, Health Departments, and NADRA. A major concern identified was the poor quality of registration data, including incorrect CNICs and birth dates, which led to delays when NADRA attempted verification.

NADRA's role remains narrowly defined as the final registration point under the Civil Registration Management System (CRMS), with regional offices lacking autonomy or access to provincial datasets. Data sharing remains restricted under NADRA's internal data protection protocols, requiring formal approval from headquarters before provincial governments can obtain registration data. This lack of timely data access hampers the ability of local authorities to monitor coverage or generate reports for policymaking.

The digital birth registration (DBR) initiatives in Punjab and Sindh have shown promise, their scalability is constrained by inconsistent implementation, digital literacy gaps, and connectivity limitations.<sup>173</sup> Efforts must now focus on simplification of birth registration process, improving interoperability across sectors, investing in digital systems, and eliminating procedural and structural barriers to ensure that every child in Pakistan can realise their right to legal identity.

<sup>169</sup> Idris, I. (2021). Increasing birth registration for children of marginalised groups in Pakistan (K4D Helpdesk Report). Institute of Development Studies. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16961>

<sup>170</sup> Idris, I. (2021). Increasing birth registration for children of marginalised groups in Pakistan (K4D Helpdesk Report).

<sup>171</sup> Idris, I. (2021). Increasing birth registration for children of marginalised groups in Pakistan (K4D Helpdesk Report).

<sup>172</sup> Oxford Policy Management. (2021). Birth registration: How we are helping to protect the invisible children in Pakistan. <https://www.opml.co.uk>

<sup>173</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2023). Summative evaluation of the digital birth registration programme (2017–2021). <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/documents/summative-evaluation-digital-birth-registration-programme-2017-2021>

## Key Recommendations to Strengthen Birth Registration System in Pakistan

Pakistan needs to urgently reform its birth registration system to ensure universal coverage, particularly for marginalised and hard-to-reach populations.

### 1. Universal Fee Waivers and Simplified Processes

- Eliminate all fees for birth registration within the first year of a child's life to remove financial barriers, extending Sindh's successful waiver model nationwide.
- Streamline documentation requirements, particularly for refugee, nomadic, and transgender children, to prevent exclusion due to complex bureaucratic procedures.

### 2. Integrated Digital Registration Systems

- Expand Punjab's Digital Birth Registration (DBR) initiative to all provinces, ensuring mobile and offline solutions are available in remote areas with limited connectivity.
- Establish real-time data sharing between NADRA, Union Councils, and health facilities to automate birth notifications and reduce delays in certification.

### 3. Proactive Registration via Service Delivery

- Mandate birth registration at all public health facilities, including immunisation centres and maternity wards, to capture births immediately after delivery.
- Link registration to social services, such as school enrolment and cash transfer programmes (e.g., BISP), to incentivise compliance among low-income families.

### 4. Targeted Outreach for Excluded Groups

- Deploy mobile registration teams in underserved regions, leveraging community health workers and local NGOs to reach nomadic and rural populations.
- Develop tailored protocols for high-risk groups, including refugees and children with disabilities, in collaboration with UN agencies and disability rights organisations.

### 5. Public Awareness and Institutional Capacity

- Launch multilingual awareness campaigns to educate communities on registration benefits and procedures, with a focus on gender-sensitive messaging.
- Train Union Council staff and healthcare workers on digital tools and inclusive registration practices to improve efficiency and reduce errors.

## 5.2 Violence against Children

Violence against children refers to any deliberate, non-essential, and unwanted act, whether threatened or actual, against a child or children that results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, death, injury, or other forms of physical or psychological suffering.<sup>174</sup> Violence is an everyday reality for many children in Pakistan. It takes different forms, is perpetrated by different people and takes place in different settings.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>174</sup>United Nations Children's Fund, International Classification of Violence against Children, UNICEF, New York, 2023.

<sup>175</sup>United Nations Children's Fund, International Classification of Violence against Children, UNICEF, New York, 2023.



## 5.2.1 Violent Discipline

Child discipline refers to any method used by parents, caregivers, or guardians to correct or guide a child's behaviour, encompassing both non-violent and violent methods. In Pakistan, punitive disciplinary methods - such as physical violence or verbal intimidation to enforce obedience - are widely used to endorse discipline. These practices are deeply ingrained in societal norms that equate physical punishment with effective child-rearing.<sup>176</sup> Many parents and caregivers lack awareness of positive discipline strategies, while economic stressors may exacerbate violent disciplinary practices.

Studies show that violent discipline, both physical and psychological, has harmful and lasting consequences for children's well-being.<sup>177</sup> Exposure to such practices negatively impacts their physical, emotional and cognitive development, with effects ranging from immediate distress to long-term psychological harm that can persist into adulthood, and can also lead to injuries and even death.<sup>178</sup>

Early exposure to violence can cause toxic stress and undermines children's ability to learn, lowers academic performance and self-esteem, while increasing their emotional distress and the risk of depression.<sup>179</sup> It also weakens their ability to form positive relationships and, in some cases, increases the risk of aggression and contributes to self-harm and engagement in risky behaviours later in life. Moreover, exposure to violence during childhood can perpetuate an inter-generational cycle of violence, as children who experience violence are more likely to normalise it and reproduce violent behaviours in their own relationships and communities as adults.<sup>180</sup>

### Widespread Use of Violent Discipline

The MICS data on violent disciplinary practices across Pakistan's provinces show that psychological aggression, physical punishment and harsh disciplinary methods against children aged 1-14 years are widespread. The high prevalence rates of child discipline suggest that violent discipline is the norm rather than the exception.

In all four provinces, the majority of children experience some form of violent discipline at home. The proportion of children exposed to a violent method of discipline is highest in KP (82.7%), followed by Punjab (80.8%), Sindh (79.6%) and Balochistan (55.3%). The relatively low figure in Balochistan indicates possible differences in disciplinary practices and reporting mechanisms. Severe physical punishment, i.e., blows to the head, ears or face or repeated beatings, continues to be a serious problem. Punjab (45.6%) and Sindh (41.1%) report the highest levels of severe physical punishment. Psychological aggression, including shouting, humiliation and intimidation, is reported at equally high levels in all provinces. Non-physical but harmful disciplinary measures remain deeply embedded in parenting practices, reinforcing the need for alternative, non-violent approaches to disciplining children. Whilst boys and girls are affected by violent discipline to a similar extent, boys experience slightly higher levels of violent discipline.

<sup>176</sup> UNICEF. (2022). Knowledge, attitudes, Beliefs, Social Norms & Practices related to Child Protection in Pakistan. United Nations Children's Fund.

<sup>177</sup> Planning and Development Department, Balochistan, & UNICEF. (2022). Balochistan Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019-20: Survey findings report.

<sup>178</sup> Tribune. (n.d.). Corporal punishment: Impacts on a child's psyche. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2484344/corporal-punishment-impacts-on-a-childs-psyche>.

<sup>179</sup> United States Institute of Peace. (2020). How to handle Pakistan's corporal punishment problem. <https://www.usip.org/blog/2020/03/how-handle-pakistans-corporal-punishment-problem>

<sup>180</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). Preventing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs): Leveraging the best available evidence. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



<b>Table 41: Child Discipline</b> Percentage of Children Aged 1-14 Years who Experienced Physical Punishment & Violent Discipline					
Region	Only Non-violent Discipline	Psychological Aggression	Any Physical Punishment	Severe Physical Punishment	Any Violent Discipline Method
<b>Balochistan</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>46.9</b>	<b>49.5</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>55.3</b>
Male	6.2	47.8	50.7	30	56.4
Female	7.8	45.9	48.2	26.4	54
<b>KP</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>77.3</b>	<b>73.1</b>	<b>37.9</b>	<b>82.7</b>
Male	4.8	79.1	75.9	40.3	84.6
Female	5.8	75.3	70	35.4	80.6
<b>Punjab</b>	<b>8.1</b>	<b>77.1</b>	<b>72.4</b>	<b>41.9</b>	<b>83.1</b>
Male	7.1	78.9	74.9	45.4	84.5
Female	9.2	75.4	69.8	38.3	81.6
<b>Sindh</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>73.3</b>	<b>68.9</b>	<b>41.1</b>	<b>79.6</b>
Male	5	74.2	70.8	43.1	80.5
Female	6	72.3	66.8	39	78.6

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2024, Sindh 2018-19)

Corporal punishment remains a persistent issue in educational settings in Pakistan, with various studies highlighting its prevalence and negative impact on students. Corporal punishment refers to any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light.<sup>181</sup> Most often involving hitting ('smacking', 'slapping', 'spanking') children with the hand or with an implement (whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc.), it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions burning, scalding or forced ingestion. Beyond physical acts, non-physical forms of punishment that are cruel or degrading, such as those that belittle, humiliate, denigrate, scapegoat, threaten, scare, or ridicule the child, are also encompassed within this definition.

Despite legal prohibitions, corporal punishment persists as a widespread practice in Pakistani schools, mostly in the public sector.<sup>182</sup> Research indicates this phenomenon stems from interconnected structural, cultural, and psychological factors. At the societal level, corporal punishment remains culturally normalised and frequently receives implicit endorsement through parental expectations for strict discipline.<sup>183</sup> Institutionally, teachers often lack training in positive classroom management techniques while facing challenging working conditions, including overcrowded classrooms and inadequate resources.<sup>184</sup> Psychologically, many educators

<sup>181</sup> United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2007). General comment No. 8: The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (U.N. Doc. CRC/C/GC/8). Retrieved from <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/content/forms-punishment>

<sup>182</sup> Hussain, S., & Ali, R. (2021). Prevalence of corporal punishment in Pakistani schools: A provincial analysis. *Journal of Educational Research*, 24(2), 45-62.

<sup>183</sup> Malik, F., & Aslam, R. (2020). Cultural acceptance of corporal punishment in Pakistan: A qualitative study. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 23(3), 210-225.

<sup>184</sup> UNESCO. (2022). Teacher training and classroom conditions in Pakistani public schools. *Global Education Monitoring Report*

replicate punitive disciplinary approaches modeled during their own educational experiences.<sup>185</sup> Compounding these issues, weak enforcement mechanisms consistently undermine existing legislative bans.<sup>186</sup>

A study on the impact of corporal punishment on school children in KP found that 83% of students in schools and madrassas in Peshawar had experienced corporal punishment, with male students disproportionately affected and showing higher levels of emotional distress, aggression and criminal behaviour compared to female students.<sup>187</sup> Another study finds a strong correlation between corporal punishment and negative effects on students, including poor academic performance, heightened anxiety, fear, lack of self-confidence and increased school dropout rates, showing that punitive disciplinary measures often contribute to violent behaviour among students.<sup>188</sup> Findings from public secondary schools in southern Punjab also suggest that physical punishment is a widespread practice that has a significant negative consequences on students' psychological well-being and academic performance.<sup>189</sup>

### Legal and Institutional Framework

The legal framework for corporal punishment in Pakistan remains inconsistent, with no comprehensive nationwide ban. The Islamabad Capital Territory Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act, 2021, and the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act, 2016, explicitly prohibit corporal punishment in educational institutions and childcare facilities. However, Punjab, KP and Balochistan lack specific laws regulating corporal punishment in schools or homes. While Section 89 of the PPC allowed corporal punishment "in good faith" by parents, guardians and teachers, the Islamabad High Court suspended this provision in 2020, but it remains legally applicable in all Punjab, KP and Balochistan.

The KP Child Protection and Welfare Act, 2010 and Balochistan Child Protection Act 2016 prohibit physical violence against children, but they do not explicitly define or address corporal punishment in the school and home environment. NCRC and advocacy groups continue to urge the governments of Punjab, KP, and Balochistan to enact legislation that explicitly prohibits corporal punishment in all settings, including schools, homes, and childcare institutions. While there have been efforts to introduce such legislation notably in Punjab and KP, no provincial law has been enacted to date.

### Gaps and Challenges

Provincial child protection agencies are mandated to deal with cases of violence against children. However, they often focus on cases of severe abuse and do not intervene in cases of corporal punishment, especially in home settings, where it is not explicitly prohibited by law. The lack of an explicit legal prohibition combined with the cultural acceptance of corporal punishment makes it difficult for these authorities to take action against corporal punishment in the home.

In educational settings, including both formal schools and madrassas, mechanisms for reporting and redressing corporal punishment remain weak or non-existent. School management often lacks training in child protection protocols, and in many cases, incidents are either ignored or

<sup>185</sup> Khan, A., & Siddiqui, S. (2019). Intergenerational transmission of punitive discipline: Evidence from Pakistani teachers. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 98, 104-112.

<sup>186</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2023). The gap between policy and practice: School violence in Pakistan.

<sup>187</sup> Ali, Z., & Zia, A. (2022). Beating the devil out of them: Effects of corporal punishment on students. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal*.

<sup>188</sup> Rehman, A., & Imran, A. (2018). The intersection of school corporal punishment and associated factors. *Journal of Educational Research*.

<sup>189</sup> Ahmed, F., & Rasheed, M. (2021). Prevalence of physical punishment in schools of Southern Punjab. *VFAST Transactions on Education and Social Sciences*.

resolved informally without accountability. Madrassas, which educate a significant portion of low-income children, are largely underregulated; many operate outside formal oversight frameworks, with minimal government monitoring or standards for child safety. Furthermore, a widespread lack of awareness among teachers and religious instructors about non-violent, positive discipline techniques perpetuates reliance on punitive practices.

### **Key Recommendations for Eliminating Violent Discipline in Pakistan**

Pakistan must adopt a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to eradicate violent discipline against children, addressing legislative shortcomings, cultural norms, and systemic failures. The following measures are essential to transition from punitive to positive disciplinary practices:

#### **1. Legislative Reforms and Policy Implementation**

- Enact explicit bans on corporal punishment in all settings (homes, schools, madrassas, child care centres, etc) in Punjab, KP, and Balochistan, aligning with ICT and Sindh's laws.
- Repeal Section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code to eliminate legal justification for "reasonable" physical punishment.
- Strengthen enforcement mechanisms, including routine inspections and penalties for violations within schools and care facilities.

#### **2. Institutional Capacity Strengthening**

- Implement compulsory training programmes for educators, madrasa instructors, and childcare providers on positive discipline techniques.
- Establish and strengthen existing school-based committees to monitor and report child protection violations, including corporal punishment and abuse.
- Embed positive discipline methodologies into national teacher training curricula, emphasising non-violent behaviour management strategies.

#### **3. Public Awareness and Cultural Transformation**

- Roll out nationwide campaigns to shift societal attitudes, engaging religious scholars, media outlets, and community leaders as advocates against corporal punishment.
- Highlight the detrimental long-term effects of violent discipline through targeted messaging in schools and public forums.

#### **4. Victim Support and Accountability Measures**

- Promote and strengthen the existing toll-free child protection helpline 1121 by enhancing its workforce, infrastructure, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to better respond to the needs of children seeking assistance and information on child protection.
- Integrate psychosocial support systems within schools to assist affected pupils and mitigate trauma-related dropout rates.

#### **5. Research and Evidence-Based Strategies**

- Conduct longitudinal research to assess the efficacy of positive discipline interventions and inform policy refinement.
- Collaborate with international partners and specialised agencies to adopt global best practices in eradicating violent discipline.

## 5.2.2 Sexual Violence against a Child

Sexual violence against a child, also known as child sexual violence (CSV) or child sexual abuse (CSA), is any intentional, unwanted and non-essential act of a sexual nature that is either committed or attempted against a child, including for exploitative purposes, and that results in, or is reasonably likely to result in, injury, pain or psychological suffering.<sup>190</sup> The term covers a wide range of behaviours and acts, including abuse through physical contact such as touching, sexual intercourse, fondling, masturbation and abuse through non-physical contact such as exposure to sexual acts, sexual harassment, online child sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

One of the most pervasive and emerging forms of sexual violence against children, both globally and in Pakistan, is the exploitation of children in the digital world. The rapid growth of the digital landscape has made the online protection of children a pressing concern globally as well as in Pakistan, warranting an exclusive focus on this particular form of sexual violence against children. The types of abuse include various forms of exploitation, coercion, and manipulation facilitated by online technologies,<sup>191</sup> including: online grooming, child sexual abuse material (CSAM), sextortion, live streaming of abuse, self-generated explicit content, cyberbullying with sexual harassment, exposure to sexual content, deepfake, etc.

### Extent and Trends of Child Sexual Violence in Pakistan

Data collected by provincial police authorities and non-governmental organisations show that sexual violence against children is alarmingly high in Pakistan, affecting children of all ages, genders and socio-economic backgrounds. However, the true extent of the problem is difficult to determine due to widespread underreporting. Deep-rooted cultural taboos and stigmatisation prevent families from reporting cases. Fear of social ostracism, damage to familial "honour", mistrust of the justice system and a lack of awareness about available redress mechanisms often cause survivors and their families to remain silent.<sup>192</sup>

CSV is addressed under various sections of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), 1860, depending on the nature and circumstances of the crime. Offences such as kidnapping for the purpose of forced marriage, sexual assault, rape, gang rape, and other forms of sexual exploitation are categorised under different legal provisions. A single incident may therefore fall under multiple sections of the PPC and other applicable laws, reflecting the complexity and severity of the acts committed against the child.

Drawing from police records across ICT, Punjab, KP, and Sindh, the data compiled provides insights into the types of child sexual violence reported during the period 1 January to 31 December 2024. Different sections of the PPC invoked through the registration of FIRs help to classify the nature of the crimes committed. However, it is important to note that the figures do not necessarily correspond to unique cases or individual victims. A single incident may involve multiple charges under separate PPC sections, and therefore the data represents the range and characteristics of offences rather than the exact number of distinct incidents. Despite this limitation, the information offers a valuable indication of the forms of sexual violence faced by children in Pakistan, with kidnapping for forced marriage, sexual assault, rape, gang rape, and unnatural offences emerging as the most frequently reported categories.

<sup>190</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, International Classification of Violence against Children, UNICEF, New York, 2023.

<sup>191</sup> National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2024). Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection.

<sup>192</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2020). Child sexual abuse and exploitation: Breaking the silence.

**Table 42: Reported Child Sexual Violence Offences under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), 1860 (1 Jan 2024 to 31 Dec 2024)<sup>193</sup>**

Section (PPC)	Details	ICT			KP			Punjab			Sindh			Total
		M	F	X	M	F	X	M	F	X	M	F	X	
292-A	Exposure to seduction <sup>194</sup>	0	1	0	0	0	0	8	2	0	6	0	0	17
354	Assault or criminal force to a woman with intent to outrage her modesty	0	35	1	0	45	0	223	684	0	0	1,222	0	2,210
354-A	Assault or use of criminal force to a woman and stripping her of her clothes	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	93	0	96
365-B	Kidnapping, abducting or inducing any woman to compel for marriage etc	0	268	0	22	218	0	588	6,647	0	0	2,811	0	10554
366-A	Procuration of a minor girl <sup>195</sup>	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	18	0	23
367-A	Kidnapping or abducting in order to subject a person to unnatural lust	0	0	0	1	0	0	368	24	0	2	3	0	398
371-A	Selling any person for purposes of prostitution, etc	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	8	0	30	50	0	90
371-B	Buying any person for purposes of prostitution, etc.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	18	48	0	74
375	Rape	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	10
375-A	Gang rape	18	6	0	5	0	0	696	199	1	12	17	0	954
376	Punishment for rape	21	21	0	138	124	0	674	1152	0	0	491	0	2,621
377	Unnatural offences	0	3	0	183	2	1	342	14	2	150	173	0	870
377-A	Sexual abuse	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	3	0	0	8
377-B	Punishment for sexual abuse	14	3	0	44	19	0	823	494	0	39	53	0	1,489
496-A	Enticing or taking away or detaining with criminal intent a woman	0	34	0	6	85	0	188	694	0	0	1179	0	2,186
509	Word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman	0	10	0	0	2	0	4	31	0	0	340	0	387
Total		56	382	1	400	498	1	3,920	9,962	3	260	6,504	0	21,987

Source: ICT Police, KP Police, Punjab Police, Sindh Police

<sup>193</sup>Data from Balochistan is not included in the table, as the information was not available in the prescribed format. However, some data was provided separately and is discussed later in the report.

<sup>194</sup>Section 292-A of the Pakistan Penal Code prohibits the publication, circulation, display, or distribution of any material or object that is likely to seduce a child (under the age of 18) into engaging in immoral or indecent acts.

<sup>195</sup>This section criminalises the act of inducing or attempting to induce a minor girl to engage in illicit sexual activity, particularly when movement or transportation is involved.

Analysis of victim age groups reveals that older children, particularly those aged 16-17 years (under 18), are most at risk of sexual violence, followed by children aged 11-15 years. This trend suggests a greater vulnerability of adolescents to sexual exploitation and abuse. In KP, however, the pattern is slightly different, with the majority of cases involving children aged 11-15 years (44%), followed by those aged 16-17 years (under 18) (33%). Younger children, aged 0-10 years, also account for a significant proportion of reported cases, comprising around 23% of the total nationally. These findings underscore that no age group is entirely protected from the risk of sexual violence.

**Table 43: Age-Wise Distribution of Crimes Against Children (2024)**

PPC Sections	Details	0-5	06-10	11-15	16-17 (under 18)
292A	Exposure to seduction	0	3	11	3
354	Assault or criminal force to a woman with intent to outrage her modesty	24	60	348	1,778
354A	Assault or use of criminal force to a woman and stripping her of her clothes	0	0	2	94
365B	Kidnapping, abducting or inducing any woman to compel for marriage etc.	42	48	1,546	8,918
366A	Procuration of a minor girl	0	3	12	8
367A	Kidnapping or abducting in order to subject a person to unnatural lust	7	49	205	137
371A	Selling any person for purposes of prostitution, etc	0	0	4	86
371B	Buying any person for purposes of prostitution, etc.	0	0	4	70
375	Rape	0	0	1	9
375A	Gang rape	4	91	460	399
376	Punishment for rape	50	281	711	1,579
377	Unnatural offences	18	138	443	271
377A	Sexual abuse	0	2	4	2
377B	Punishment for sexual abuse	46	462	689	292
496A	Enticing or taking away or detaining with criminal intent a woman	170	114	144	1,758
509	Word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman	2	1	19	365
Total		363	1,252	4,603	15,769

Source: ICT Police, KP Police, Punjab Police, Sindh Police

According to the Balochistan Police, a total of 193 cases of CSV were reported for the period from January 2022 to September 2024. The age distribution of victims shows that children aged 6-11 years were the most affected, accounting for 53% of cases, followed by children aged 12-17 years (under 18), who accounted for 38% of cases. The youngest age group, 0–5 years, accounted for 9% of reported cases.



**Table 44: Balochistan (1 Jan 2022- 20 Sep 2024)**

Crime	Gender of Child			Age		
	M	F	X	0-5	6-11	12-17 (under 18)
Rape/Sodomy	135	39	0	17	91	66
Child Sexual Abuse (Rape/Sodomy) & Murder	16	1	0	0	12	5
Child Sexual Abuse (Gang Rape/Sodomy) & Murder	1	0	0	0	0	1
Child Sexual Abuse (Gang Rape/Sodomy)	1	0	0	0	0	1

Source: Balochistan Police

Despite the availability of crime data from provincial police departments, there are notable gaps in how this information is collected, categorised, and reported. Pakistan's crime data management system requires substantial improvements to ensure accuracy and consistency. The absence of standardised crime classification protocols often results in underreporting or misreporting of certain offences, particularly those related to sexual violence against children.

### Statistics from CSOs on CSV

The SSDO report “Child Sexual Abuse: Mapping Trends in Pakistan (2019-2023)” highlights a rise in reported cases of child sexual abuse in Punjab, Sindh, KP and Balochistan between 2019 and 2023.<sup>196</sup> Similarly, Sahil's report “Cruel Numbers 2023” documented 2021 cases of CSV in 2023.<sup>197</sup> An analysis of Sahil's data reveals distinct patterns in the forms and locations where CSV occurs in Pakistan:

- Homes and extended family environments are the most common settings for sexual assault with family members often being the main perpetrators. Perpetrators exploit their trusted positions and easy access to children within the household or family network.
- Schools and madrassas are cited as common settings, particularly in cases involving teachers or religious teachers.
- Street-connected Children and child labourers face heightened vulnerability in public places and workplaces, where they lack protection and supervision.
- Online grooming and exploitation are increasing with rising internet penetration, with older children being particularly at risk.

### The Growing Threat of OCSEA

As the eighth largest internet user in the world, Pakistan has a growing number of children accessing digital platforms through smartphones, computers and other devices,<sup>198</sup> exposing children to serious risks. These platforms vary widely in their functionality and include: social media, messaging, gaming, video sharing, live-streaming, online marketplaces, dark web, peer-to-peer networks, etc.

The CyberTipline, managed by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), serves as a global clearinghouse for reports of OCSEA, including CSAM, child trafficking, and online grooming. Between 2021 and 2023, the total number of cases reported worldwide has steadily increased. Over 99% of reports received by the CyberTipline related to incidents of suspected CSAM.

<sup>196</sup>SSDO (2024), Report on Child Sexual Abuse 5 Years Analysis, 2019-2023.

<sup>197</sup>Sahil (2024). Cruel Numbers, 2023. <https://www.sahil.org>



**Table 45: Reported CSAM Cases (Global)**

Year	Number of CSAM Cases
2021	29,309,106
2022	31,901,234
2023	35,925,098

Source: Cybertipline

Companies in the United States must comply with 18 USC 2258A, which requires US companies to report to the NCMEC CyberTipline if they become aware of suspected CSAM on their platforms and servers. In 2023, Electronic Service Providers (ESPs) reported 35.9 million OCSEA cases to the CyberTipline, with Facebook reporting the most cases, followed by Instagram.

**Table 46: Country-Specific Reports of OCSEA Cases**

Country	2021	2022	2023
India	4,699,515	5,675,324	8,923,738
Philippines	3,188,793	2,576,182	2,740,905
Pakistan	2,030,801	2,059,884	1,924,739
Indonesia	1,861,135	1,878,011	1,925,549
Bangladesh	1,743,240	2,145,098	2,491,368
Iraq	1,220,470	905,883	749,746
Algeria	1,171,653	731,167	762,754

Source: Cybertipline

Pakistan is one of the main contributors to the CSAM cases reported worldwide. In 2023, a total of 1.92 million cases were reported from Pakistan. Although these figures do not give a direct indication of the prevalence of CSV in Pakistan, they do show that large amounts of CSAM are being accessed, shared or uploaded in the country. In particular, the FIA has reported that 70% of CSAM uploaded from Pakistan consists of non-Asian content produced abroad, highlighting the transnational nature of this issue.<sup>199</sup> Despite the high number of CSAM cases detected from Pakistan, local reporting remains extremely low, with only 421 local cases were reported to the FIA in 2023 and 2024. The stigma associated with sexual abuse, lack of awareness among parents and children, mandatory requirements to verify complaints and mistrust in law enforcement prevent victims from seeking help.

<sup>198</sup> DataReportal. (2024). Digital 2024: Pakistan. Retrieved October 10, 2024, from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-pakistan>

<sup>199</sup> National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2024). Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection.

**Table 47: Local Complaints Registered in Pakistan (2021-2023)**

Region	2023	2024
ICT	7	8
Balochistan	3	13
KP	139	46
Sindh	10	29
Punjab	90	69
GB	1	6
Total	250	171

Source: FIA

**Table 48: FIA Registration of FIRs (2021–2024)**

Year	FIRs Registered
2021	53
2022	65
2023	51
2024	58

Source: FIA

Once a complaint is received by the FIA, it is examined and, after an initial investigation, a charge is filed. In 2021, the FIA registered 53 FIRs; in 2022, 65 FIRs; in 2023, 51 FIRs; and in 2024, 58 FIRs were registered. Moreover, the FIA arrested 65 accused individuals in 2024. The modest number of FIRs registered each year reflect limitations in FIA's investigative capacity and available human resources.

**Table 49: FIRs Registered on CSAM in 2024 (Section 22 of PECA)**

Cybercrime Reporting Centres	FIRs Registered on local Complaints	FIRs Registered on CyberTipline Reports	FIRs Registered on Referrals from Embassies/ INTERPOL	Total FIRs	Total Accused Arrested
ICT	6	1	1	8	8
Balochistan	2	0	0	2	3
KP	10	2	0	12	13
Punjab	23	5	0	28	32
Sindh	6	1	0	7	6
GB	1	0	0	1	3
Total	48	9	1	58	65

Source: FIA

## Legal and Institutional Framework

The Pakistani legal framework addresses CSV through both federal and provincial jurisdiction. The PPC, 1860, criminalises various forms of CSV, including sexual assault, trafficking and harassment. The Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), 1898, prescribes investigation and trial procedures, medical examinations, expedited trials and protection of survivors. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021, strengthens trauma-sensitive responses, ensuring that child survivors receive dignified treatment, legal aid and medical support. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, criminalises child sexual abuse materials, online grooming and digital exploitation. The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, extends protection to children in educational establishments and institutions.

Child protection laws provide the legal framework for the protection of children and response to CSV cases. The ICT Child Protection Act 2018, Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2004, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act 2010, Sindh Child Protection Authority Act 2011, and Balochistan Child Protection Act 2016 collectively mandate key response mechanisms in their respective jurisdictions, including the identification and reporting of abuse, establishment of child protection units, case management, rehabilitation services, and coordination with law enforcement and the judiciary.

CSV cases require coordination among multiple institutions to ensure both justice for survivors and prosecution of offenders. The police, as the first responders in most cases of violence against children, are responsible for registering FIRs, investigating incidents and arresting suspects. However, child survivors often face barriers in accessing justice, including delays in FIR registration, victim-blaming and lack of child-friendly reporting mechanisms. While some jurisdictions have specialised gender-based violence units and dedicated police desks for handling sensitive cases, their effectiveness varies greatly across regions.

To address online child sexual exploitation and abuse, the FIA and its Cyber Crime Wing (CCW) investigate cases of online abuse, grooming and child exploitation material. The FIA collaborates with Interpol to dismantle cross-border networks involved in OCSEA. In November 2024, Pakistan became the 71st country to be included in Interpol's International Child Sexual Exploitation (ICSE) database, an important step in identifying and protecting victims, preventing investigative duplication and strengthening global child protection efforts.<sup>200</sup> Amendments to the PECA 2016 in 2022 allowed police to register FIRs and investigate OCSEA cases, making it easier for child victims to report cases even in areas where the FIA lacks a physical office. Following these amendments, the Islamabad Police established the Cybercrime Investigation Unit as part of efforts to crack down on digital crimes,<sup>201</sup> and provide a platform for victims to seek justice.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) is responsible for monitoring and regulating online content in Pakistan and has the authority to block or remove unlawful content, including child sexual abuse material. In April 2024, the PTA informed the Peshawar High Court that it had blocked 998,334 weblinks for pornography.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>200</sup> Dawn. (n.d.). Pakistan Joins Interpol's Child Abuse Database – The State of Children in Pakistan. <https://stateofchildren.com/pakistan-joins-interpols-child-abuse-database/>

<sup>201</sup> State of Children in Pakistan (n.d.-a). Islamabad police establish first cybercrime investigation unit – The State of Children in Pakistan. <https://stateofchildren.com/islamabad-police-establish-first-cybercrime-investigation-unit/>

<sup>202</sup> State of Children in Pakistan (n.d.-a). PTA blocks 1.07m 'objectionable' web links – The State of Children in Pakistan. <https://stateofchildren.com/pta-blocks-1-07m-objectionable-web-links/>

### NCRC Initiatives to Protect Children Online

In 2024, NCRC collaborated with Meta and the Ministry of Human Rights to launch the Urdu version of the 'Take It Down' portal, a global initiative by NCMEC to combat the unauthorised sharing of intimate images of minors online. Additionally, NCRC conducted a "Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan" and published "Safeguarding Your Child in the Digital Age", a guide for parents and caregivers to promote digital safety.

### Gaps and Challenges

Law enforcement actions in Pakistan remain inconsistent, with gaps in child-friendly investigation procedures and limited accessibility of reporting mechanisms for children and their families, especially in rural areas.<sup>203</sup> The lack of standardised forensic protocols, inadequate medical care and insufficiently trained personnel further undermine efforts to collect evidence and prosecute.<sup>204</sup> Survivors often face stigmatisation and blame, which discourages families from seeking justice or accessing support services<sup>205</sup> and face lengthy and adversarial court proceedings where delays in case resolution retraumatise victims.<sup>206</sup> Essential support services for survivors, such as psychological counselling, legal aid and medical care, remain underfunded and inaccessible for the majority of victims.<sup>207</sup> While standardised case management and referral systems does exist in each province and territory, the key challenge lies in its effective operationalisation. Issues such as lack of resources, limited coordination among stakeholders, and gaps in implementation hinder its full functionality. Strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring inter-agency collaboration, and improving monitoring mechanisms are essential to making the system truly effective for child protection.

Institutions such as schools, madrassas and childcare facilities often fail to respond responsibly in cases of CSV, with negligence and complicity remaining persistent issues.<sup>208</sup> A lack of awareness and understanding of sexual violence further exacerbates the problem, as many parents/carers are not trained to recognise or identify such cases. This is largely due to the inadequate development of preventive mechanisms in Pakistan. Community-based education programmes, school initiatives and parental awareness campaigns are either non-existent or lack the necessary reach and effectiveness to address CSV comprehensively.<sup>209</sup>

The 2024 Situation Analysis on Child Online Protection in Pakistan, conducted by the NCRC, highlights several critical challenges faced by the FIA to handle OCSEA cases. A major obstacle is the lack of jurisdiction in transnational cases, where perpetrators or digital content are located outside Pakistan, hindering effective investigation and prosecution. Abuse by anonymous perpetrators further complicates efforts to identify offenders, as individuals often conceal their identities through various online tools. The detection of technology-facilitated child abuse remains difficult due to the specialised forensic skills and tools required, which are limited and easily not available in all cities. There is also limited engagement between the FIA and child protection agencies, weakening the coordinated response needed to support child victims. Additionally, poor awareness among stakeholders, including families, children, and frontline

<sup>203</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). (2021). Justice delayed: Challenges in addressing child sexual abuse cases in Pakistan.

<sup>204</sup> Shujaat, Q. (Nov 2024.). Situation Analysis of Child Sexual Abuse in Punjab.

<sup>205</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2020). Child sexual abuse and exploitation: Breaking the silence.

<sup>206</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB). (2020). Enhancing access to justice for vulnerable groups: Lessons from South Asia

<sup>207</sup> Gaps and Challenges to address Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.).

<https://stateofchildren.com/child-sexual-abuse-in-pakistan/gaps-and-challenges-csa/>

<sup>208</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2020). Accountability in institutional child protection: Gaps and recommendations for South Asia.

<sup>209</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2020). Accountability in institutional child protection: Gaps and recommendations for South Asia.

officials, contributes to underreporting of cases. Despite receiving numerous alerts and complaints, the number of cases formally investigated remains low, largely due to persistent capacity constraints, including shortages of trained personnel and technological resources.

### **Key Recommendations for Addressing Child Sexual Violence in Pakistan**

Pakistan must adopt a comprehensive, survivor-centred approach and multi-sectoral response to combat CSV, prioritising prevention, protection, and justice while addressing systemic gaps.

#### **1. Child Empowerment and Prevention**

- Implement mandatory school programmes on body safety, consent, and digital literacy for children, tailored to developmental stages and delivered through trained educators.
- Establish peer-led support networks in schools/madrassas and anonymous reporting channels to encourage safe disclosure.

#### **2. Institutional and Systemic Reforms**

- Standardise and enforce child-sensitive protocols across police, FIA and healthcare services:
  - Requiring all police stations to have dedicated, trained CSV units with clear protocols for evidence collection, survivor interviews, and case management to ensure sensitive handling of complaints.
  - Roll out hospital-based Child Protection Committees nationwide to coordinate medical, legal, and psychosocial support.
  - Create integrated survivor centres in all districts, co-locating forensic, legal, and counselling services.
  - Expand the FIA Cybercrime Wing's capacity by investing in human resources and infrastructure, establishing protocols for handling digital evidence, and developing formal referral pathways with child protection agencies, the police, and INTERPOL.

#### **3. Justice and Survivor Support**

- Establish specialised fast-track courts for CSV cases nationwide, mandating child-friendly procedures such as in-camera trials, video testimonies, and trauma-informed judicial processes to prevent re-victimisation.
- Launch an Survivor Support Fund to cover survivors' immediate needs (medical, legal, relocation).

#### **4. Cultural and Awareness Shifts**

- Conduct nationwide awareness campaigns utilising mass media, community leaders, and survivor testimonials to challenge harmful norms, reduce stigma, and encourage reporting of abuse.
- Community workshops for parents on recognising abuse, coupled with training for local leaders (imams, teachers).

## 5. Strengthen Data Systems and Improve Accountability

- Strengthen crime data management systems to accurately record and categorise cases of sexual violence against children by developing standardised protocols, ensuring disaggregated data collection, and training relevant law enforcement personnel to improve consistency, reliability, and accountability in reporting.
- Introduce stringent accountability mechanisms for institutions handling CSV cases, including performance audits of child protection agencies and disciplinary measures for negligent officials.

### 5.2.3 Harmful Practices

Child marriage remains a deeply entrenched harmful practice in Pakistan. It refers to any formal marriage or informal union involving a child under the age of 18, whether with an adult or another child.<sup>210</sup> A related harmful custom is *watta satta* (exchange marriage), where families trade brides between households, often leading to child marriages and limiting women's autonomy. This practice can lead to child marriages and limits a girl's, and later a woman's ability to make decisions about her life, reinforcing gender inequality throughout her life course.

Child marriage is influenced by multiple factors, including deeply entrenched social and gender norms, gender inequalities, economic deprivations, poverty, and inadequate access to education.<sup>211</sup> Recent humanitarian challenges, including related to climate change such as floods in 2022, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated poverty levels and deepened inequalities, with evidence suggesting that this has led to an increase in child marriages in affected areas. Child marriage has profound and far-reaching consequences, not only for the individual child, but for society as a whole. Forcing children into marriage disrupts their physical, emotional and social development. Child brides face serious health risks, particularly due to early pregnancies, that increase the risk of maternal and neonatal complications. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to conditions such as obstetric fistula, premature births and delivering low birth weight infants. The physical immaturity of young mothers contributes to higher maternal and infant mortality.<sup>212</sup> Beyond health risks, child marriage entrenches patriarchal norms, perpetuates structural discrimination, and limits women and girls' ability to pursue education, economic independence and meaningful participation in society.<sup>213</sup>

### Prevalence of Child Marriages

Pakistan has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. According to the PDHS 2017-18, 18.3% of girls are married before the age of 18, while 3.6% of girls in Pakistan are married before the age of 15.

The MICS also sheds light on child marriage practices in the various provinces (marriages before the age of 15 and 18) and reveals considerable gender-specific differences. Girls continue to be far more prone to child marriages than boys especially those from poor households, rural and remote areas, with primary or no formal education, children of bonded labourers, refugee girls, ethnic and religious minorities.<sup>214</sup> Sindh, Balochistan and KP show the highest prevalence of child

<sup>210</sup>United Nations Children's Fund. (n.d.). Child marriage. UNICEF. Retrieved Nov 11, 2024, from <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>

<sup>211</sup>United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2021). Child marriage country profile: Pakistan. UNICEF. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-country-profiles/>

<sup>212</sup>United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2021). The impact of child marriage on adolescent girls. UNICEF.

<sup>213</sup>UN Women. (2020). Gender equality: Tackling harmful practices. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org>.

<sup>214</sup>United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2021). Child marriage country profile: Pakistan. UNICEF. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-country-profiles/>

marriages among girls, indicating a close link between poverty, lack of education and child marriage practices. Although Punjab reports a comparatively lower prevalence, child marriage remains a problem, especially in rural and economically deprived areas where families often resort to early marriages due to social expectations and financial constraints. However, recent data from the Punjab MICS 2024 indicates some progress: the proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married before age 15 has declined from 3.3% in 2017–18 to 2.5%, and those married before age 18 has reduced from 14.6% to 13.8%.

<b>Table 50: Prevalence of Child Marriage Before Age 15 by Gender and Province</b>		
% of Population Aged 20–24 Years		
<b>Provinces</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Balochistan	1.6	7.2
KP	0.9	6.4
Sindh	2.2	7.5
Punjab	0.6	2.5

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2024, Sindh 2018-19)

<b>Table 51: Prevalence of Child Marriage Before Age 18 by Gender and Province</b>		
% of Population Aged 20–24 Years		
<b>Provinces</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Balochistan	6.4	21.9
KP	5.3	26.3
Sindh	8.5	24.7
Punjab	3	13.8

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Punjab 2024, Sindh 2018-19)

The 2023 Census reveals a deeply concerning trend: 641,887 children aged 15–17 in Pakistan, including 211,499 boys and 430,388 girls, were reported as married, divorced, widowed, or separated. This accounts for approximately 4% of all children in this age group. This highlights a significant gender gap and represents a serious threat to child well-being and development. The prevalence of early marriage varies considerably across provinces. Balochistan reports the highest rate, with 12% of children aged 15–17 affected (9% boys, 16.5% girls), followed by KP at 6% (2.9% boys, 9.6% girls). In contrast, Punjab, Sindh, and the ICT report comparatively lower rates.



**Table 52: Percentage of Children Aged 15–17 Who Are Married, Divorced, Widowed, or Separated**

Region	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Pakistan	4.0	2.7	6.0
ICT	2.0	1.2	2.6
Balochistan	12.0	9.0	16.5
KP	6.0	2.9	9.6
Punjab	3.0	1.8	3.7
Sindh	4.0	2.7	5.7

Source: Census 2023 & NCRC

Alarmingly, 348,193 (54%) of child marriage cases among children aged 15–17, including 211,499 boys and 136,694 girls, are illegal under provincial laws (see *Legal and Institutional Framework for Child Marriages for details*). This highlights systemic failures in the enforcement of child marriage laws and child protection mechanisms intended to safeguard children.

**Table 53: Estimated Number of Illegal Child Marriages by Age and Region**

Based on provincial legal age thresholds for girls

Region	Boys		Girls	
	Age	Number	Age	Number
ICT	15-17	869	15	304
Balochistan	15-17	48,512	15	10,793
KP	15-17	40,990	15	14,177
Punjab	15-17	71,343	15	20,086
Sindh	15-17	49,785	15–17	91,334
Total		211,499		136,694

Source: Census 2023 & NCRC

A 2023 study titled ‘Diagnostic Study of Nikkahnamas in Punjab’ by the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) and Musawi analysed 1,100 Nikkahnamas from Lahore and Pakpattan to assess compliance with legal requirements. The findings revealed that 1.6% of nikkahnamas in Pakpattan documented child marriages in violation of the Punjab Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2015, while no such violations were found in Lahore. However, incomplete documentation was widespread. In Lahore, 16% of nikkahnamas were missing the bride's CNIC details and 10% were missing the groom's CNIC details. The issue was more pronounced in Pakpattan, where 48% were missing the bride's CNIC details and 19% were missing the groom's CNIC details. These documentation gaps pose a significant challenge in enforcing child marriage laws, as the absence of CNIC details makes it difficult to verify the ages of brides and grooms. Strengthening birth and marriage registration systems and ensuring strict enforcement of legal requirements are essential to preventing child marriages.

## Forced Conversions and Child Marriages

Forced conversions, especially of young girls from Hindu and Christian communities, are a serious violation of their fundamental rights and freedoms.<sup>215</sup> Abductions and subsequent forced conversions and marriages to older men are frequently reported in Sindh and Punjab.<sup>216</sup> Data analysis conducted by the Centre for Social Justice from 2021 to 2024 shows 421 documented cases, with an alarming 71% of victims being children under the age of 18.<sup>217</sup> The situation is particularly critical in Sindh province, which accounts for 69% of all reported cases, followed by Punjab with 30% case. Among these victims, 22% were under the age of 14. Weak legal protections and societal apathy allow perpetrators to act with impunity, leaving families traumatised and powerless.<sup>218</sup>

## Legal and Institutional Framework

The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, applicable in Islamabad, KP and Balochistan, sets the minimum age at 16 years for girls and 18 years for boys. Sindh has the most progressive law, the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013, which sets the minimum age of marriage for boys and girls at 18 years and provides for stricter penalties. The Punjab Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, of 2015 retains the minimum age of 16 years for girls but increases the penalties for violations. Pakistan has separate laws for different religions: The Christian Marriage Act of 1872 was amended in 2024 to raise the minimum age for marriage of Christians to 18 years, while the Hindu Marriage Act of 2017 and the Punjab Sikh Marriage Act of 2018 had already set 18 years as the legal age for marriage. Moreover, PPC Sections 498-B and 310-A criminalise forced marriages and harmful practices such as *vani*, but enforcement remains difficult.

Local governments and union councils play an important role in regulating marriages and verifying the ages of the bride and groom through documents such as CNICs and B-forms.<sup>219</sup> They are also responsible for ensuring that officiators (such as *nikah khawans*) comply with child marriage laws. The police investigate violations, take action against those facilitating underage marriages and ensure legal accountability for offenders. In most provinces, child protection authorities are authorised to intervene when children are at risk. This includes removing children from harmful situations, providing legal and psychological support and facilitating access to other essential services.

## Legal Age for Marriage

The minimum legal age for marriage is not uniform in Pakistan. Except in Sindh, the minimum legal age for girls is 16 years and 18 for boys. A significant challenge is that marriages conducted below the legal age often recognised under religious and customary practices, making it difficult to annul or contest such unions. While some religious scholars argue that marriage at puberty should be permissible, the Federal Shariat Court (FSC) ruled in 2021 that setting a minimum age of marriage does not contradict Islamic principles.<sup>220</sup> This position was reaffirmed on 6 March 2023 when the FSC dismissed a petition against the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013. In April

<sup>215</sup> United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024, April 11). Pakistan: UN experts alarmed by lack of protection for minority girls forced into religious conversion and marriage. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/pakistan-un-experts-alarmed-lack-protection-minority-girls-forced-religious>

<sup>216</sup> Hassan, S. (2023). The plight of Pakistan's minority women: Forced conversions and marriages. Human Rights Watch Blog. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/blog/2023/09/pakistans-minority-women>

<sup>217</sup> National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2025). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/ncrcpakistan>

<sup>218</sup> Amnesty International. (2023). Pakistan: Weak protections leave minorities at risk. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/pakistan-minority-protections/>

<sup>219</sup> National Database and Registration Authority. (n.d.). Civil Registration Management System. NADRA Pakistan. Retrieved November 11, 2024, from <https://www.nadra.gov.pk/civil-registration-management-system/>

<sup>220</sup> National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2021). Policy Brief on the Legal Framework for Child Marriage in Pakistan.

2024, the Lahore High Court declared the gender-based disparity (18 for males and 16 for females) in the Punjab Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 2015 unconstitutional.<sup>221</sup> The court ruled that this distinction violated the constitutional right to equality under Article 25 of Pakistan's Constitution. Consequently, the court directed the Punjab government to revise the legislation to establish a uniform minimum marriage age for both genders. However, implementation of this Order remains pending, leaving the legal disparity in effect.

Despite these landmark rulings by the FSC and LHC, legal inconsistencies, weak enforcement,<sup>222</sup> and deeply rooted cultural and religious norms continue to enable child marriages,<sup>223</sup> leaving many girls unprotected from coercion and exploitation.

### Complicated Dissolution of Child Marriages

The legal procedure for dissolving child marriages is equally problematic. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, and subsequent amendments in Punjab and Sindh make no explicit provision for the annulment of marriages once they have been contracted or solemnised.<sup>224</sup> Instead, the procedure for dissolution is set out in the Family Court Act, 1964, while the grounds for dissolution are specified in the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939. This places an undue burden on girls and makes redress unattainable for many. Court delays and the high cost of legal proceedings create further barriers for girls seeking to dissolve child marriages.

### Progress in Reforming Child Marriage Laws

Efforts to reform child marriage laws have made progress at the federal and provincial levels in 2024, driven by advocacy efforts by NCRC, NCSW and development partners.<sup>225</sup> Bills have been introduced in Balochistan, Punjab and at the federal level and are awaiting further review and approval. While these initiatives represent progress, it remains a challenge to gain the massive support of parliamentarians due to deep-rooted social, cultural and religious barriers.

### Gaps and Challenges

Cultural acceptance and religious misinterpretation are key drivers of child marriage in Pakistan, where it is often seen as a private family matter, which also hinders legal reforms.<sup>226</sup> Weak oversight, corruption and inadequate administrative systems prevent Union Councils from verifying ages, compounded by low birth registration rates and the absence of accountability mechanisms. Many marriages are performed by Nikah registrars who operate without official licences or bypass verification processes, allowing underage marriages to continue unchecked. Poverty, gender inequality and economic pressures further drive families to arrange child marriages. The impact of humanitarian crises and climate-related shocks such as displacement and food insecurity further increases the risk, as families may see early marriage as a coping mechanism in times of instability.<sup>227</sup> Compounding these issues are low birth registration rates, weak law enforcement, and a lack of awareness and education, leaving countless girls vulnerable to exploitation and without access to protection or support.<sup>228</sup>

<sup>221</sup> Lahore High Court. (2024). Azka Wahid v. Province of Punjab & others (W.P No.32798 of 2023). Lahore High Court. <https://sys.lhc.gov.pk/appjudgments/2024LHC1392.pdf>

<sup>222</sup> National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2021). Policy Brief on the Legal Framework for Child Marriage in Pakistan.

<sup>223</sup> UN Women. (2022). Understanding child marriage: Key drivers and barriers. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org>

<sup>224</sup> National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2021). Policy Brief on the Legal Framework for Child Marriage in Pakistan.

<sup>225</sup> NCRC. (2024). NCRC Quarterly Newsletter April-June 2024.

<sup>226</sup> UN Women. (2022). Understanding child marriage: Key drivers and barriers. <https://www.unwomen.org>

<sup>227</sup> Nguyen, V. (2025, March 8). Washed away. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1896579>

<sup>228</sup> Ready to marry? Exploring the dynamics of child marriage in Pakistan. (n.d.). Girls Not Brides. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/ready-to-marry-dynamics-of-child-marriage-in-pakistan-evidence-from-three-development-programmes/>

## Key Recommendations to Address Child Marriage in Pakistan

Pakistan must adopt a coordinated, rights-based approach to end child marriage through legal reforms, institutional strengthening, and societal transformation.

### 1. Legal Reforms

- Establish a uniform legal age of marriage at 18 for both boys and girls across all provinces. Amend the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, and the respective provincial laws to eliminate inconsistencies and align with international standards.
- Introduce stricter penalties for those involved in child marriage, including parents, guardians, and officiants (Nikah Khawan). Make child marriage a non-compoundable and non-bailable offence to ensure legal accountability.
- Introduce legal reforms to streamline the annulment process of child marriages by establishing child-friendly courts or designated family courts with expedited procedures, ensuring young individuals are protected from prolonged legal battles.

### 2. Enhancing Enforcement and Institutional Capacity

- Conduct regular training sessions for police officers, judiciary members, local council members, Nikah Registrar and Nikah Khawan on child rights and the legal implications of child marriage. Strengthen the capacity of law enforcement to investigate and prosecute cases.

### 3. Community Mobilisation and Awareness Campaigns

- Launch awareness campaigns targeting rural and tribal communities, emphasizing the negative impacts of child marriage on health, education, and socio-economic development. Use media, religious leaders, and community leaders to disseminate information and change attitudes.
- Collaborate with religious scholars and traditional leaders to reinterpret religious texts and traditions in support of delaying marriage until the legal age.

### 4. Economic Support and Incentive-Based Programmes

- Provide financial incentives to families to keep their daughters in school and delay marriage. Link cash transfers to school attendance and health check-ups to ensure that girls receive education and healthcare.
- Offer vocational training and employment opportunities for girls and young women to reduce economic dependence on early marriage and empower them to make informed decisions about their lives.

### 5. Integration with Health and Education Sectors

- Use health and education platforms to promote child rights and identify at-risk children. Train health workers and teachers to recognise signs of early marriage and report cases to relevant authorities.
- Strengthen birth registration systems to ensure that all children have legal documentation of their age, making it difficult for families to falsify age during marriage.

## 6. Support and Rehabilitation for Victims

- Create safe spaces and when necessary, provide temporary shelters for victims of child marriage when girls cannot remain with their families, offering legal aid, counselling, and educational opportunities.
- Develop comprehensive services that provide psychosocial support, education, and vocational training for child brides, empowering them to rebuild their lives and thrive.

## 5.3 Economic Exploitation of Children

The economic exploitation of children, often referred to as child labour, involves work that robs them of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and harms their physical and mental development. It also includes harmful activities that interrupt education, lead to early school dropout or force children to combine schooling with excessive labour.<sup>229</sup> A critical distinction must be made between 'child labour' and 'child work'. The latter includes non-harmful, age-appropriate activities such as helping in the household chores or in family businesses, provided they do not impede education, health or development.<sup>230</sup>

Child labour is prevalent in Pakistan. Children work in various sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, domestic work, brick kilns and informal roadside shops. Among the various forms of child labour, hazardous work poses significant risks. It exposes children to dangerous conditions such as toxic chemicals, heavy machinery, extreme temperatures, long working hours, night shifts or abusive environments, resulting in physical injuries, mental stress and emotional trauma.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) describes the worst forms of child labour as serious violations of children's rights that require immediate action. These include slavery-like practices (e.g. human trafficking, debt bondage, forced labour), recruitment in armed conflict, commercial sexual exploitation (e.g. prostitution, pornography) and involvement in illegal activities such as drug production and trafficking.<sup>231</sup> Hazardous work that jeopardises the health, safety or morals of children is also counted among the worst forms.

Child Domestic Labour (CDL) is one of the most widespread and alarming forms of child labour in Pakistan. It includes part-time, full-day, live-in work, and the risks faced by CDL vary depending on the employment arrangements. Domestic workers who live in the home are particularly vulnerable as they often work without fixed hours or supervision, which increases the risk of exploitation and abuse. Part-time workers who deal with multiple employers on a daily basis face particular risks, including unsafe environments and inconsistent treatment.<sup>232</sup>

### Prevalence of Child Labour in Pakistan

At the national level, there is no comprehensive or up-to-date picture of child labour in Pakistan. The last national survey conducted in 1996 estimated that 3.3 million children were in full-time employment.<sup>233</sup> To fill this data gap, the provincial and federal governments rolled out child labour surveys in 2018 to better understand the extent and dynamics of the issue. By December 2024,

<sup>229</sup> SFJ, NCHR. (2023). Situation Analysis of Child Labour in Punjab.

<sup>230</sup> SFJ, NCHR. (2023). Situation Analysis of Child Labour in Punjab.

<sup>231</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). (1999). Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org>

<sup>232</sup> Concept – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/child-domestic-labour-pakistan/concept/>

<sup>233</sup> Prevalence of Child Labour in Pakistan – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.).

<https://stateofchildren.com/child-labour-in-pakistan/prevalence-of-child-labour-in-pakistan/>

Punjab, KP and GB have finalised and published their survey findings. In the meantime, surveys are underway in Sindh, Balochistan, AJ&K, and ICT and are expected to be finalised by mid 2025.<sup>234</sup>

The Punjab Child Labour Survey (PCLS) 2019-2020, released in October 2022, shows that the prevalence of child labour among 5-17 year olds is 16.9%. Among 5-14 year olds (under 15 years), the prevalence is 13.4%. Almost half of children aged 10-14 (47.8%) who are engaged in child labour work in hazardous conditions, posing a serious risk to their health and well-being.

Table 54: Child Labour in Punjab (%)			
Age	Total	Boys	Girls
5-14	13.4	16.8	9.7
5-17	16.9	21.8	11.5

Source: PCLS 2019-20

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Labour Survey (KPCLS) released in January 2024 shows that 9% of all children aged 5–17 years in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) are engaged in child labour. Of these children, 73.8% work in hazardous occupations, indicating that the majority of child labourers are exposed to hazardous working conditions.

Table 55: Child Labour in KP (%)			
Age	Total	Boys	Girls
5-17	9	11.7	5.9
5-11	5.3	5.9	4.7
12-13	10.9	14.3	7.2
14-17	15.5	22.3	7.9

Source: KPCLS 2022

In both Punjab and KP, the prevalence of child labour is higher among boys than girls, with the prevalence of child labour increasing with age in both genders. In both provinces, agriculture, forestry and fishing are the most common economic sectors in which children are employed, accounting for 55.3% in Punjab and 51.6% in KP. In Punjab, manufacturing (13.6%) and water supply (11.8%) follow, while in KP, water collection (19.1%), wholesale and retail trade (9.7%) and manufacturing (7.7%) are the next most common industrial sectors for child labour.

Given the invisibility of certain forms of child labour, especially when children live with employers or work on the streets, existing surveys do not fully capture the extent of the issue. Child domestic setting, for example, is widespread but is hardly recorded in official statistics as it takes place inside private households, and where children work behind closed doors. The KPCLS 2022 acknowledges the prevalence of child domestic labour in KP, but admits that this form of work has not been adequately captured in its findings. Similarly, the PCLS 2019-20 provides insights into the broader landscape of child labour, but highlights the challenges in accurately documenting child work in the household. There are several reasons for the underreporting, including respondents not providing information on child servants or misclassifying their work as non-economic household chores rather than labour.

<sup>234</sup> Child Labour Survey Graph | Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (n.d.). <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/child-labour-survey-graph>



**Table 56: Child Domestic Labour in Punjab**

Age Group	Total Working Population	Children in Domestic Work (%)
5-14	3,834,264	1.80
5-17	6,672,389	1.70
5-9	779,391	1.30
10-14	3,054,873	2.00
15-17	2,838,125	1.50

Source: Punjab Child Labour Survey 2019-20

The PCLS 2019-20 shows that in Punjab, 70,000 children in the age group of 5-14 years and over 110,000 children in the age group of 5-17 years are working as child domestic workers. Alarming, more than 10,000 very young children in the age group of 5-9 years are employed in these roles, indicating the early age at which children are forced into labour. The data also shows a clear gender imbalance, with girls clearly favoured as domestic workers. This is consistent with the findings of an ILO scoping study, which shows that the majority of households employ a girl as a domestic worker in Pakistan, particularly between the ages of 10 and 14.<sup>235</sup>

**Table 57: Gender Disaggregation- CDL in Punjab**

Gender	Age Group	Total Working Population	Children in Domestic Work (%)
Boys	5-14	2,503,689	0.70
	5-17	4,421,067	0.60
Girls	5-14	1,330,263	4.00
	5-17	2,251,010	3.90

Source: Punjab Child Labour Survey 2019-20

### Key Determinants of Child Labour

The findings of the child labour surveys in Punjab and KP show several overlapping factors that influence the prevalence of child labour, with education level, economic status and household living conditions playing a central role.<sup>236</sup> In both provinces, there is a clear correlation between the level of education of the head of household and the incidence of child labour. As the level of education increases, the likelihood of children working decreases, underlining the important role of education in protecting children from child labour. Similarly, lower income households have a higher rate of child labour, with a significant proportion of working children belonging to families receiving support from the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP). This indicates that cash transfers alone are insufficient to eliminate child labour; a "cash-plus" approach is needed, combining financial support with interventions that address the underlying drivers of child labour.

Other factors include the migration of the head of household and the loss of one or both parents, which put households under additional economic pressure. Natural shocks, such as disasters, increase dependence on child labour. The primary reasons cited by parents or guardians for

<sup>235</sup>International Labour Organization. (n.d.). Child labour in domestic work: A scoping study in Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org>

<sup>236</sup>Prevalence of Child Labour in Pakistan – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.-b). <https://stateofchildren.com/child-labour-in-pakistan/prevalence-of-child-labour-in-pakistan/>



allowing children work are to help with household enterprises, to support the family and to supplement household income. These findings illustrate that poverty, education and socio-economic challenges interact to perpetuate child labour.

### Multidimensional Consequences of Child Labour

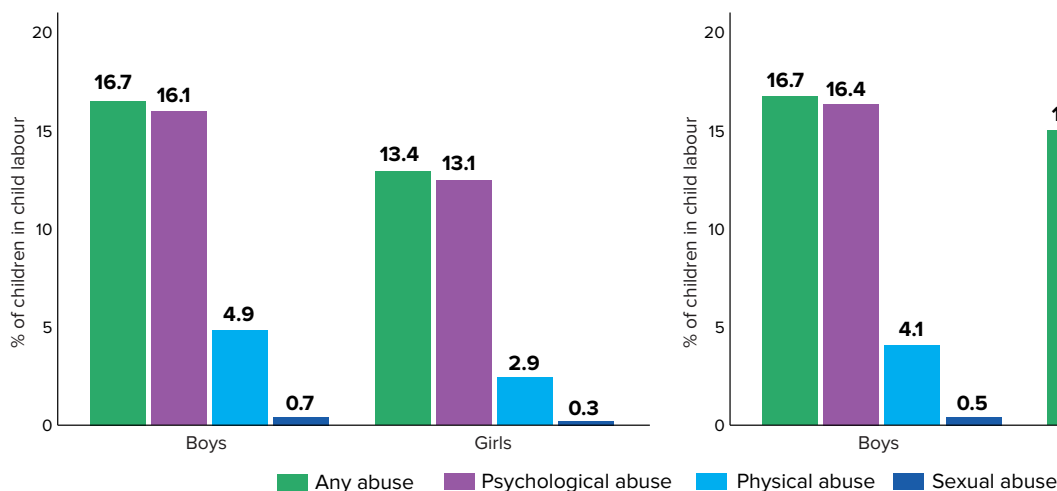
Both survey findings highlight the consequences of child labour and show that it has a detrimental effect on children's well-being and development. Across all age groups, extreme fatigue is the most frequently cited consequence faced by working children, affecting their physical and cognitive development. This is followed by injury or poor health, which is particularly pronounced in older children and has a negative impact on their general health and ability to perform daily tasks.

A disturbing pattern observed in both surveys is that working children are significantly less likely to attend school than their non-working peers. This inequality increases with age, suggesting that child labour remains a major barrier to education, which ultimately affects children's future opportunities and reinforces the cycle of poverty.

Injuries are disproportionately common among working children and occur much more frequently compared to their non-working peers. Exposure to health hazards increases with age, particularly among girls, which enhances their vulnerability.

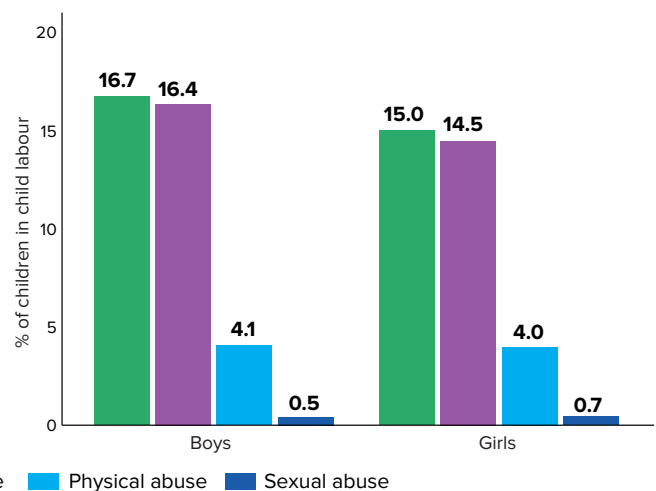
Both in Punjab and KP, many children engaged in labour face physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, with boys reporting slightly higher rates than girls. Psychological abuse, such as intimidation and verbal harassment, can lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, and long-term emotional distress. Physical violence, including beatings and harsh punishments, can result in injuries and chronic trauma. Sexual exploitation is also a serious risk, particularly for girls and vulnerable children, leading to lasting psychological scars and further perpetuating cycles of abuse and exploitation.

**Percentage of children aged 5-14 in child labour in Punjab that experienced abuse at work by type of violence and sex**



Source: PCLS 2019-20

**Percentage of children aged 5-17 in child labour in KP that experienced abuse at work by type of violence and sex**



Source: KPCLS 2022

### NCRC Proposes Amendment to Criminalise Child Labour in Domestic Work

In 2024, the NCRC has proposed an amendment to the Pakistan Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure to criminalise child labour in domestic settings and eliminate slavery-like practices. The proposal includes the introduction of two new sections in PPC 1860: Section 374A: Engaging a Child in Domestic Work and Section 374B: Punishment for Parents or Guardians. The proposed amendments provide for severe penalties, including imprisonment of three to seven years and fines of at least PKR 100,000 for employing children under the age of 18 as domestic workers. Exceptions are made for children over 16 engaged in light, supervised and non-hazardous work. Parents or guardians will be held accountable and fined if they allow children to work in exploitative conditions. The proposed Bill is under review by the Ministry of Law and Justice.

### Legal and Institutional Framework

Pakistan's legal framework for child labour consists of constitutional provisions, federal laws and provincial laws aimed at protecting children from economic exploitation and hazardous work. The Constitution of Pakistan 1973 prohibits the employment of children under the age of 14 in hazardous occupations (Article 11(3)) and mandates free and compulsory education for children between the ages of 5 and 16 (Article 25-A). The PPC, 1860, criminalises child trafficking, forced labour and cruelty towards children.

At the federal level, the Employment of Children Act, 1991 prohibits child labour in hazardous occupations and regulates working conditions for adolescents (14–18 years). At the provincial level, Punjab, Sindh, KP and Balochistan have enacted child labour laws that set a minimum age of employment and regulate hazardous work. While Punjab prohibits child labour under the age of 15, Balochistan, Sindh and KP have set the minimum age at 14. These laws restrict hazardous work for adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 (15 and 18 in Punjab) and provide penalties for violations.

Pakistan's labour laws dealing with child domestic labour (CDL) vary from province to province. The ICT Domestic Workers Act, 2022 and the Punjab Domestic Workers Act, 2019 prohibit CDL under the age of 16 and 15 respectively, while Balochistan classifies CDL as hazardous and prohibits the employment of children under the age of 18. The Sindh Child Protection Authority Act, 2011 recognises domestic work as a form of exploitation but does not contain a specific legal prohibition. In KP and Sindh, there is no explicit prohibition of CDL in the laws, leaving gaps in legal protection for CDL.

Sector-specific laws such as the Factories Act, the Mines Act and the Shops and Establishments Act regulate child labour in all industries, while the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act and the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2018) take action against forced and bonded labour of children.

Various departments at the federal and provincial levels play an important role in combating child labour in Pakistan.<sup>237</sup> At the provincial level, labour departments and labour inspectors play a central role in enforcing the law. They are tasked with monitoring workplaces, ensuring compliance with child labour laws and identifying violations. However, their jurisdiction is often

<sup>237</sup> Institutional Framework for Child Labour in Pakistan – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/child-labour-in-pakistan/institutional-framework-for-child-labour-in-pakistan/>

limited to the formal sectors, meaning that a large proportion of child labour workforce in the informal sectors is not regulated.

The police are tasked with dealing with criminal offences such as abuse, assault, harm, cruelty and human trafficking. Child protection agencies are responsible for protecting children, including those involved in CDL, by focussing on rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration. Child Protection Officers (CPOs) are authorised to intervene when children are at risk and ensure their protection and access to support services.

Education Departments which provide both formal and non-formal education, play a role in preventing child labour through education. Social welfare departments and social protection agencies (Benazir Income Support Programme, Punjab Social Protection Authority, etc.) aim to reduce economic pressure on families and reduce their dependence on child labour. District Vigilance Committees (DVCs), established under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992, are mandated to monitor and provide redressal to children living in bonded labour.

### Labour Inspections

Labour inspection systems in Pakistan remain weak and largely ineffective in addressing child labour. There is no dedicated child labour inspection mechanism. According to the ILO, enforcement efforts are constrained by insufficient staffing, limited training on child labour issues, and lack of coordination between inspection authorities and child protection systems.<sup>238</sup>

The data on labour inspections in Balochistan and KP show remarkable differences in the enforcement of regulations in the two provinces.<sup>239</sup> However, these differences need to be interpreted in the context of factors such as population size, economic activity and institutional capacity. KP consistently reports a higher number of inspections, reflecting greater industrial activity and a more structured inspection framework rather than stronger enforcement alone. Despite the difference in inspection volumes, convictions and penalties remain low in both provinces. Another problem is the inconsistency of the penalties imposed by the courts, which casts doubt on their deterrent effect. Although fines have increased over time, they remain relatively low. The low conviction rate also points to systemic challenges, including weaknesses in enforcement, procedural delays, etc., all of which undermine accountability.

**Table 58: Labour Inspections in Balochistan and KP**

Year	No. of inspections		No. of convictions		Fine/Penalties imposed by Court	
	Balochistan	KP	Balochistan	KP	Balochistan	KP
2022	241	8,982	5	360	500	385,862
2023	387	10,567	10	245	10,000	600,000
2024 (1 Jan-30 May 2024) Balochistan (1 Jan-28 Feb 2024) KP	221	2,928	3	17	3,000	51,000

Source: Director General of Labour Welfare Balochistan & Directorate of Labour, KP

<sup>238</sup>International Labour Organization. (2019). Accelerating action against child labour: Global report on child labour and forced labour. International Labour Organization.

<sup>239</sup>Inspection records were not made available by Punjab and Sindh departments

## Gaps and Challenges

Child labour is widespread in Pakistan, driven by poverty,<sup>240</sup> lack of education,<sup>241</sup> weak enforcement, and social acceptance.<sup>242</sup> The majority of child labour takes place in the informal sector, particularly in agriculture, where existing laws are unenforceable, and compulsory education laws are poorly enforced.<sup>243</sup> Low school enrolment rates, a high number of children not attending school, large family sizes, economic pressure and inadequate social protection mechanisms further push children into labour.<sup>244</sup> Weak coordination between labour departments, child protection agencies, and law enforcement hinders effective case management and referrals.<sup>245</sup> Rescued child workers often have no access to rehabilitation, vocational training and psychosocial support, or social protection schemes, including support for their families, leaving them trapped in a cycle of vulnerability.

CDL remains a hidden and unregulated form of child labour. Children who work as domestic helpers usually have no formal agreements or contracts that protect them. As a result, these children are often ignored by laws and social protection systems, making them easy targets for abuse and exploitation.<sup>246</sup> The lack of data and lack of monitoring mechanisms in private households means that children working as domestic workers are not counted and are unprotected.<sup>247</sup> Labour inspectors are not authorised to enter private homes without permission, police and child protection agencies are responsible for responding to cases of abuse and exploitation. However, their intervention is typically limited to extreme instances, leaving many cases of child labour unaddressed.<sup>248</sup>

## Key Recommendations to Address Child Labour in Pakistan

Pakistan must adopt a coordinated approach to eliminate child labour, including its hidden forms like child domestic labour, through legal reforms, strengthened enforcement, education, and social protection.

### 1. Legal and Policy Reforms

- Harmonise child labour laws across provinces to establish a uniform minimum working age of 16 and prohibit hazardous work for those under 18, in line with Article 25-A of Pakistan Constitution.
- Explicitly ban child domestic labour in all provincial laws, recognising its exploitative nature, and amend the PPC, 1860 to criminalise abuse of child domestic workers under Section 374A.
- Ratify ILO Convention 189 to extend labour protections to domestic workers and empower authorities to inspect households for violations.

<sup>240</sup>World Bank. (2021). Poverty and inequality: Addressing the drivers of child labour in South Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org>

<sup>241</sup>UNICEF. (2021). Child labour and education: Addressing the barriers. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org>

<sup>242</sup>International Labour Organization (ILO). (2023). Tackling child labour in Pakistan: Policies, initiatives, and challenges. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed\\_norm/%40ipec/documents/publication/wcms\\_888809.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40ed_norm/%40ipec/documents/publication/wcms_888809.pdf)

<sup>243</sup>National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2021). Policy Brief on the Legal Framework for Child Domestic Labour in Pakistan.

<sup>244</sup>SFJ, NCHR. (2023). Situation Analysis of Child Labour in Punjab

<sup>245</sup>SFJ, NCHR. (2023). Situation Analysis of Child Labour in Punjab.

<sup>246</sup>Anti-Slavery International. (2021). Child Domestic Workers: Hidden Exploitation and Abuse.

<sup>247</sup>National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2021a). Policy Brief on the Legal Framework for Child Domestic Labour in Pakistan.

<sup>248</sup>National Commission on the Rights of Child. (2021a). Policy Brief on the Legal Framework for Child Domestic Labour in Pakistan.

## 2. Strengthening Enforcement and Case Management

- Expand labour inspections to cover informal sectors and private households, with digital reporting tools for communities to report violations.
- Establish Local Monitoring Committees (LMCs) to identify child labour cases at the grassroots level and refer them to child protection agencies for intervention.
- Enhance inter-agency coordination between labour departments, child protection units, and law enforcement to ensure rescued children receive comprehensive case management, including: immediate removal from hazardous work, psychosocial support and medical care, legal assistance and reintegration into education or vocational training

## 3. Education and Social Protection

- Link conditional cash transfers (e.g., BISP) to school attendance, prioritising families in high-risk sectors (e.g., CDL, brick kilns) to reduce economic dependence on child labour.
- Establish non-formal education centres with flexible timings for working children, coupled with vocational training (TVET) for adolescents (14–18) to transition into safe employment.
- Address barriers to education by providing free uniforms, meals, and transportation subsidies to improve retention rates.

## 4. Awareness and Advocacy

- Launch nationwide campaigns challenging societal norms that normalise child labour, using media, religious leaders, and survivor testimonials.
- Engage employers and middlemen in awareness programmes to discourage demand for child labour in domestic work and informal sectors.

## 5. Data and Research

- Conduct provincial surveys on child labour every five years to provide updated data for informed policymaking.
- Broaden the scope of the Labour Force Survey conducted by the PBS to include children aged 5–17, and introduce a focus on CDL to capture data on children engaged in domestic work across urban and rural areas.

# 5.4 Street-Connected Children

Street-connected children are among the most marginalised and vulnerable populations in the world, including Pakistan. These children, for whom the street is a central reference point for their identity, livelihood or survival, often face multiple challenges ranging from poverty and exploitation to social exclusion.<sup>249</sup> Their existence is inextricably linked to the street environment, whether they live on the street, work there or rely on its networks for support.

The street-connected children in Pakistan are not a homogenous group. They engage in a range of activities and face a variety of circumstances. Like all other children, they are entitled to rights such as protection, education, healthcare, and participation under the UNCRC. Many of these children belong to the broader category of out-of-school-children, includes children who have

<sup>249</sup>NCRC. (n.d.). Causes and Impact of Street Children – The State of Children in Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://stateofchildren.com/street-children-in-pakistan/causes-and-impact-of-street-children/>

been displaced for economic reasons, migrants or survivors of natural disasters. Their connection to the streets can be understood through the following categories,<sup>250</sup> defined by UNICEF:

1. **Children 'of' the Street:** Those who live and sleep on the streets, often relying on informal networks for survival.
2. **Children 'on' the Street:** Those who work on the streets during the day but return to their families or shelters at night.
3. **Street-Family Children:** Those who live with their families on the streets, sharing the street environment as their primary living space.

### Prevalence of Street-Connected Children

The prevalence of street-connected children in Pakistan remains a critical but largely undocumented problem, as there is no comprehensive data on the actual number of children living and working on the streets. These children mainly live in urban centres and big cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Rawalpindi and Multan.<sup>251</sup> In Peshawar and Quetta, there is also a significant number of Afghan children.<sup>252</sup>

In these urban areas, street-connected children engage in various forms of labour and survival activities, often under exploitative and hazardous conditions. Many of them are forced into begging by their families or trafficking networks,<sup>253</sup> making them highly vulnerable to abuse, violence and criminal exploitation. The law prohibits begging in Pakistan, but the practice is still widespread. A regional survey conducted by the ILO in 2006 found that 34% of beggars surveyed in Pakistan were forced into begging and controlled by organised mafias. It is estimated that there are between five and 25 million beggars in the country, a significant proportion of whom are children, but there is no authentic data available to quantify the beggar population.<sup>254</sup>

Other children work as street vendors and hawkers. They have to endure long working hours and extreme weather conditions and have little or no protection.<sup>255</sup> Child waste pickers are among the most vulnerable groups, as they are exposed to toxic materials, health risks and exploitative intermediaries. Children working in informal sector, such as in garages, tea stalls or markets, are also exposed to exploitative wages, physical abuse and unsafe environments.

Many street-connected children are runaways, fleeing domestic violence and neglect, having lost one or both parents.<sup>256</sup> Reports from child protection organisations indicate that once on the streets, they form links with street communities that provide them with temporary support, but also expose them to serious risks, including exploitation, violence, drug abuse, trafficking and forced involvement in organised crime.<sup>257</sup>

The 2022 study by Wafaqi Mohtasib highlights the extreme vulnerability of street children in Islamabad and cites poverty, family pressure and human trafficking as the main reasons for their presence on the streets. Forced begging and organised exploitation, particularly by begging

<sup>250</sup> Concept and Types of Street Children – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.).

<https://stateofchildren.com/street-children-in-pakistan/concept-and-types-of-street-children/>

<sup>251</sup> Iqbal, F. (2012). Emotional problems of street children in three major cities of Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 11(2).

<sup>252</sup> Tufail, P., Ahmad, M., & Khan, S. (2004). Child labour among Afghan refugee children: Investigating the underlying drivers. Pakistan Institute of Development Economics.

<sup>253</sup> BBC News. (2013, June 1). Child victims of Pakistan's 'begging mafia'. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22729351>

<sup>254</sup> The News International. (2020, May 18). Child begging. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/660213-child-begging>

<sup>255</sup> Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC). (2018). *The State of Pakistan's Children*.

<sup>256</sup> Zia, H. (2021). A qualitative exploration of abuse among street children. *Global Anthropological Studies Review*, 1(1), 1 – 10.

<sup>257</sup> The Independent. (2022, July 11). Exploitation, addiction and slavery among Pakistan's street children.



mafias, were identified as significant threats that expose children to violence, abuse and hazardous working conditions. Although 91% of street children live with their families, many remain trapped in exploitative situations. The study also found that most street-connected children in Islamabad are boys (65%), with an average age of 12 years, who engage in small-scale economic activities in unsafe and exploitative conditions and have limited access to basic services such as healthcare and sanitation.

### Legal and Institutional Framework

Pakistan's legal framework for street-connected children includes child protection and labour laws aimed at protecting their rights and welfare. The child protection laws provide for rescue, rehabilitation and welfare mechanisms, while the labour laws only apply when children are working in formal workplaces, leaving informal and unregulated sectors largely unprotected. Provincial child protection laws establish dedicated bodies to support vulnerable children, including the Sindh Children Act 1955, Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2004, KP Child Protection and Welfare Act 2010, Sindh Child Protection Authority Act 2011, Balochistan Child Protection Act 2016 and ICT Child Protection Act 2018. These laws provide for child protection services, case management systems and rehabilitation centres. The Sindh Street Children Shelter Home Act, 2018 aims to provide specialised interventions in Sindh through shelter homes that provide education, vocational training and healthcare. In Pakistan, the West Pakistan Vagrancy Ordinance 1958 is enforced in all provinces except KP. This law categorises street-connected children as vagrants and allows the police to arrest them without a warrant. Although these provisions aim to rehabilitate vulnerable children through welfare homes, they often criminalise poverty rather than tackling its root causes. This approach increases the risk of violence and abuse by law enforcement, exploiters, and even members of the public, highlighting the urgent need to prioritise protective and rehabilitative support over punitive measures.

The issue of street-connected children in Pakistan is primarily the responsibility of the child protection authorities and the social welfare department.<sup>258</sup> The police help in rescue operations to remove children from the streets. Once the children are rescued, they are usually placed in Child Protection Institutes (CPI) or shelters.<sup>259</sup> These facilities, if available in the district, provide a temporary safe place where the children have access to basic services such as food, healthcare and psychosocial support. The shelters are usually set up and managed by provincial social welfare departments. In Punjab, the CP&WB operates its own CPIs and is authorised to issue licences to private organisations to operate child protection facilities. However, preventive measures remain limited. Access to education, social protection programmes, and family-strengthening support is often unavailable, making it difficult to address the underlying factors that push children to the streets.

### Gaps and Challenges

Street-connected children are among the most marginalised and at-risk groups in Pakistan, facing extreme forms of violence, exploitation, and social exclusion. Systematic gaps in the legal, institutional and social framework hinder an effective response to the needs of street-connected children. The lack of reliable data makes it difficult to assess the scale of the issue, leaving many children invisible to policy makers and service providers.<sup>260</sup> While child protection laws exist, they

<sup>258</sup> Institutional Framework for Street Children in Pakistan – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.).

<https://stateofchildren.com/street-children-in-pakistan/institutional-framework-for-street-children-in-pakistan/>

<sup>259</sup> Institutional Framework for Street Children in Pakistan – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.).

<https://stateofchildren.com/street-children-in-pakistan/institutional-framework-for-street-children-in-pakistan/>

<sup>260</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2019). Situation Analysis of Children in Pakistan.



often fail to recognise the specific needs of children in street situations. These children require a rights-based, child-centred approach that prioritises their protection, development, and reintegration, in line with the CRC Committee General Comment No. 21.

The institutional framework remains fragmented and underfunded while children face severe social stigmatisation and discrimination, which severely limits their access to essential services and their integration into society.<sup>261</sup> Street-connected children face acute health risks due to their precarious living conditions and lack of access to health services, exposing them to malnutrition, disease and substance abuse.<sup>262</sup> The establishment of District Child Protection Units (DCPUs), which provide case management and referral services, is progressing slowly. While some children live with their families, others lack parental care altogether, requiring different and customised support mechanisms.<sup>263</sup> Moreover, child protection efforts focus on reactive measures rather than prevention, and fail to address root causes such as poverty, domestic violence, and lack of social protection.<sup>264</sup>

Although police are responsible for rescuing children from harmful environments, law enforcement responses are often punitive rather than protective,<sup>265</sup> with frequent reports of harassment, unlawful detention, and neglect undermining trust in the system.<sup>266</sup> The focus should be on long-term solutions, including strengthened social protection, access to education, family support programmes, and safe alternative care options.

### Key Recommendations to Protect Street-Connected Children in Pakistan

Pakistan must prioritise comprehensive reforms to protect street-connected children from systemic neglect and abuse by addressing root causes and undertaking urgent interventions across key areas: protection, prevention, rehabilitation, and social inclusion.

#### 1. Policy Reforms

- Provinces should expedite the approval of the already drafted Child Protection Policy, supported by provincial action plans and clear accountability mechanisms.
- Strengthen role of District Child Protection Committees to oversee implementation, monitoring, and periodic evaluation of interventions

#### 2. Expand and Strengthen District Child Protection Units (DCPUs)

- Establish DCPUs in every district to ensure localised access to child protection services.
- Develop a simple and accessible registration system for migrant families to account for children during transitions and to ensure continued access to education and social services.
- Implement the Child Protection Information System in all provinces to ensure coordinated tracking and follow-up of individual cases across districts.

<sup>261</sup> Consortium for Street Children (CSC). (2020). Changing Perceptions: Addressing Stigma and Supporting Street-Connected Children. CSC.

<sup>262</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). (2019). Health and Vulnerabilities of Marginalised Children in Urban Settings: A Focus on South Asia. WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia.

<sup>263</sup> Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC). (2021). Child Protection System in Pakistan: Gaps and Recommendations.

<sup>264</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2018). Comprehensive Response to Vulnerability: Prevention as a Key Strategy in Child Protection. UNODC.

<sup>265</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2020). "No Room to Breathe": Child Rights Violations by Law Enforcement in Pakistan. HRW.

<sup>266</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2020). "No Room to Breathe": Child Rights Violations by Law Enforcement in Pakistan. HRW.

### 3. Establish Drop-In and Non-Residential Facilities

- Establish child-friendly drop-in centres in urban areas to provide basic services such as hygiene, nutrition, healthcare, and recreational opportunities.
- Use these centres as referral hubs for services like psychosocial support, drug rehabilitation, education, and vocational training.
- Establish flexible, non-formal education programmes at Drop-in-Centres or separate tailored to the unique needs of street-connected children, enabling their reintegration into the formal education system.

### 4. Enhance Data Collection and Research

- Conduct periodic nationwide surveys and district-level assessments to identify trends, gaps, and emerging challenges. Analyse the root causes, including socio-economic factors, migration patterns, and systemic failures, to design evidence-based policies.
- Implement innovative and ethical methodologies, such as head counts and participatory research, to accurately estimate the number of street-connected children.

### 5. Community Awareness and Social Inclusion

- Launch campaigns to challenge societal stigma and stereotypes against street-connected children, promoting their inclusion and rights.
- Collaborate with religious leaders, community influencers, and civil society organisations to advocate for the prevention and protection of street-connected children.

## 5.5 Child Trafficking

Child trafficking is a grave human rights violation that exploits and endangers the lives of children. As defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), child trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation. Unlike trafficking in adults, the element of consent is irrelevant in cases of child trafficking. Children are deemed incapable of legally consenting to their exploitation, and the mere act of recruitment, transfer, or harbouring for exploitative purposes is sufficient to classify an act as trafficking, regardless of whether the exploitation has occurred.

Child trafficking includes various forms of exploitation, which differ in context and practice but share a common thread of severe harm and abuse inflicted upon victims. These include sexual exploitation, forced labour, begging, forced marriage, child soldiers, and organ harvesting, among others.<sup>267</sup>

### Prevalence of Child Trafficking

The cases reported by the provincial police departments for the period from 1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024 indicate various forms of child trafficking, including sexual exploitation, forced marriage and the sale and purchase of children for prostitution. Cases registered under sections 366-A, 367-A, 371-A and 371-B fall under the definition of child trafficking as they involve the recruitment, movement, and exploitation of children. However, cases under Section 365-B (kidnapping for the purpose of forced marriage) may constitute trafficking in persons if elements

<sup>267</sup> UNICEF. (2018, July 27). Children make up almost one-third of all human trafficking victims worldwide. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/stories/children-make-almost-one-third-all-human-trafficking-victims-worldwide>

of coercion, exploitation or financial gain are present. Notably, this dataset does not include other common forms of child trafficking such as forced labour and bonded labour, nor does it include cases registered under the Trafficking in Persons Act 2018, which criminalises internal and cross-border trafficking for various exploitative purposes.

**Table 59: Cases of Child Trafficking in Pakistan (1 Jan 2024 to 31 Dec 2024)**

Section (PPC)	Details	ICT			KP			Punjab			Sindh			Total
		M	F	X	M	F	X	M	F	X	M	F	X	
365-B	Kidnapping, abducting or inducing any woman to compel for marriage etc.	0	268	0	22	218	0	588	6,647	0	0	2,811	0	10,554
366-A	Procuration of a minor girl.	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	18	0	23
367-A	Kidnapping or abducting in order to subject a person to unnatural lust.	0	0	0	1	0	0	368	24	0	2	3	0	398
371-A	Selling any person for purposes of prostitution, etc.	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	8	0	30	50	0	90
371-B	Buying any person for purposes of prostitution, etc.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	0	18	48	0	74
Total		0	268	0	23	220	0	958	6,690	0	50	2,930	0	11,139

Source: ICT Police, KP Police, Punjab Police, Sindh Police

According to Balochistan Police, only one case of child trafficking was reported between 1 January 2022 and 20 September 2024. Also, 96 cases of child abduction and kidnapping were registered, involving 49 male and 47 female victims. However, it is likely that offences falling under provisions such as Section 366-A, 371-A and 371-B were overlooked in reporting or misclassified under other statutory provisions.

According to TIP Report 2024, the Government of Pakistan investigated 1,936 cases of human trafficking under the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (PTPA) in 2022, including 856 cases of sex trafficking and 988 cases of forced labour.<sup>268</sup>

Cultural and social norms often disguise certain forms of child trafficking, which leads to them being socially accepted and not reported as a crime. For example, child domestic work is often seen as providing a job rather than a form of exploitation and is only noticed in extreme cases of abuse.<sup>269</sup> Similarly, children subjected to commercial sexual exploitation remain hidden in illegal networks and only surface through law enforcement interventions. These factors make it difficult to quantify the true extent of child trafficking in Pakistan, as many cases do not meet recognised

<sup>268</sup> U.S. Department of State. (2024). 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/pakistan/>

<sup>269</sup> International Labour Organization. (2021). Child labour in domestic work in Pakistan: A scoping study. [https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40asia/%40ro-bangkok/%40ilo-islamabad/documents/publication/wcms\\_851153.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40asia/%40ro-bangkok/%40ilo-islamabad/documents/publication/wcms_851153.pdf)

legal definitions, are misclassified as other offences or remain undetected due to deep-rooted societal attitudes.<sup>270</sup>

### Legal and Institutional Framework

Article 11 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973 explicitly prohibits all forms of slavery, forced labour, and trafficking. The PPC, 1860 criminalises kidnapping, abduction, and trafficking for exploitation under Sections 369A, 365B, 366A, 367A, 371A, and 371B, prescribing severe penalties for offenders. The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (PTPA), 2018 is the primary national law addressing trafficking of both adults and children, establishing measures for prevention, prosecution, and victim rehabilitation. It defines a child as anyone under 18 years of age and imposes strict penalties, with offenders facing up to 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of up to one million rupees when the victim is a child or woman.

At the provincial level, the child protection laws of Sindh, Balochistan, KP and ICT explicitly recognise child trafficking and provide mechanisms for the protection, rehabilitation and reintegration of victims. The Sindh Child Protection Authority Act 2011, the Balochistan Child Protection Act 2016, the ICT Child Protection Act 2018 and the KP Child Protection and Welfare Act 2010 recognise child trafficking as a form of exploitation and provide protection services for trafficked children. While the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2004 does not specifically mention trafficking, it criminalises forced begging and exploitation and allows the CP&WB to intervene in cases of trafficking.

The FIA plays a leading role in cases of cross-border human trafficking.<sup>271</sup> The FIA operates a dedicated wing to combat trafficking and smuggling in transnational crimes. In cases of internal trafficking, the police serve as the primary enforcement agency in Pakistan, whereas cases involving bonded labour and labour exploitation, both the Labour Department and the Police share responsibilities. The Labour Department is primarily responsible for monitoring workplaces, identifying cases of bonded labour, and ensuring compliance with labour laws. The Police, on the other hand, are responsible for the criminal law aspects. Child protection organisations play an important role in the protection, recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration of child victims of trafficking.

### Gaps and Challenges

Child trafficking is a grave violation of children's rights requiring urgent and child-sensitive responses. While Pakistan has legal provisions against trafficking, enforcement gaps, weak victim support services, and deeply embedded social norms continue to leave many children vulnerable to exploitation. Pakistan is classified as a Tier 2 country by the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, which means that while efforts are being made to combat trafficking, the country does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons.<sup>272</sup>

Pakistan faces a number of challenges in addressing child trafficking, including low awareness and poor understanding of the different forms of trafficking. Many people do not recognise the different forms of human trafficking. These include sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced

<sup>270</sup> Aga Khan University. (2021, March 12). Majority of child abuse cases in Pakistan go unreported: experts. [https://www.aku.edu/news/Pages/News\\_Details.aspx?nid=NEWS-002473](https://www.aku.edu/news/Pages/News_Details.aspx?nid=NEWS-002473)

<sup>271</sup> Institutional Framework for addressing Child Trafficking – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/child-trafficking-in-pakistan/institutional-framework-for-addressing-child-trafficking/>

<sup>272</sup> U.S. Department of State. (2024). 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Pakistan. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/pakistan/>

marriage, organ trafficking and exploitation for criminal activities such as drug smuggling or begging. This lack of recognition makes it difficult to identify and effectively combat human trafficking.<sup>273</sup> The complexity of exploitation makes the issue even more complicated. For instance, victims of forced or bonded labour may be forced to work under fraudulent or abusive conditions without this being perceived as trafficking by them or their families.<sup>274</sup> Even in cases of forced marriage, deeply ingrained cultural norms often mask the fact that the person is being trafficked for exploitation. Economic hardship and lack of regulation in the informal sector exacerbate the risk of human trafficking, particularly in agriculture, domestic work and bonded labour.<sup>275</sup>

The legal framework dealing with child trafficking is also confusing as laws such as the PPC, labour laws and provincial child protection laws overlap, leading to confusion in enforcement and prosecution.<sup>276</sup> Law enforcement agencies face resource constraints, including inadequate infrastructure, training and personnel, which affect their ability to effectively identify, investigate and prosecute child trafficking cases. Protection and rehabilitation services for victims remain inadequate. They have limited access to shelter, medical care, legal aid and vocational training.<sup>277</sup> Weak coordination and information sharing between federal, provincial and local authorities responsible for prevention, investigation, prosecution and victim rehabilitation undermine anti-trafficking initiatives and child protection services for victims of trafficking.<sup>278</sup>

A child protection-centred response should include comprehensive prevention efforts (such as school-based awareness, birth registration, and social protection for vulnerable families), a strengthened referral system to connect child trafficking survivors to specialised services, and child-friendly investigative procedures to prevent further trauma. Without these essential interventions, trafficked children remain at high risk of re-trafficking and long-term harm.

## Recommendations to Address Child Trafficking in Pakistan

Child trafficking remains a critical human rights challenge in Pakistan, requiring a multi-sectoral response to address legislative gaps, institutional weaknesses, and ensure effective prevention and protection measures for children.

### 1. Legislative and Policy Reforms

- Harmonise the definition of a "child" (under 18) across all laws, including the PPC, labour laws, and provincial child protection acts, to eliminate contradictions.
- Amend the PTPA, 2018 to fully align with the Palermo Protocol, explicitly criminalising all forms of trafficking, guarantee victim compensation and a precedence clause in the PTPA to override conflicting laws.
- Consolidate fragmented trafficking-related laws into a single Human Trafficking Code to streamline enforcement and reduce jurisdictional overlaps.

<sup>273</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2018). Global report on trafficking in persons 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>

<sup>274</sup>International Labour Organization (ILO). (2017). Global estimates of modern slavery: Forced labour and forced marriage.

<sup>275</sup>International Labour Organization (ILO). (2021). Informal economy in South Asia: Challenges and policy responses. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/global/research>

<sup>276</sup>Policy and Law- Child Trafficking – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). <https://stateofchildren.com/policy-and-law-child-trafficking/>

<sup>277</sup>International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2020). Assisting victims of trafficking: Standards and practices.

<sup>278</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2021). Strengthening the coordination of responses to human trafficking and bonded labour in South Asia.

## 2. Institutional Strengthening and Victim Support

- Child protection agencies across should implement the case management and referral system framework to connect trafficking victims with service providers, including shelters, counselling, legal support, and rehabilitation services, ensuring timely and effective assistance.
- Develop and implement SOPs nationwide to standardise the identification, assistance, and referral of trafficking victims.

## 3. Capacity Building

- Conduct capacity-building programmes for the Police and FIA, focusing on technical investigations, use of digital tools, and application of the PTPA to ensure proper identification and prosecution of trafficking cases.
- Train judges on the nuances of child trafficking, internal trafficking issues, and the application of the PTPA, emphasising victim-centred adjudication.

## 4. Awareness and Public Engagement

- Launch nationwide campaigns using local languages to educate communities about the signs and risks of trafficking. Incorporate outreach through schools, social media, and traditional media channels to maximise reach.
- Involve community leaders, teachers, and civil society in identifying and reporting trafficking incidents. Schools should monitor student attendance to identify early signs of vulnerability or exploitation and report drop-out to authorities.

## 5. Economic and Social Safeguards

- Link social protection programmes with school attendance incentives to discourage child labour and reduce vulnerabilities to trafficking.
- Advocate for and coordinate with relevant sectors to expand employment-generation schemes for vulnerable families, in order to alleviate economic pressures that increase children's risk of exploitation.

## 6. International and Cross-Border Collaboration

- Strengthen collaboration with destination countries and neighbouring states through information exchange, adoption of best practices, and joint investigations to combat transnational trafficking.
- Train border security forces to identify trafficking indicators and prevent cross-border smuggling of children.



## 5.6 Juvenile Justice

The juvenile justice system is a specialised child-centred framework designed to uphold the rights of children in conflict with the law while ensuring their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. It seeks to divert children away from formal judicial proceedings and prioritise restorative, non-custodial solutions whenever possible.<sup>279</sup> A child in conflict with the law is defined as any person under the age of eighteen who has committed, or is accused of committing an offence.

Unlike the adult criminal justice system, which focuses on punitive measures, juvenile justice is centred on rehabilitation and reintegration. Children in conflict with the law often come from marginalised backgrounds and face systemic barriers such as poverty, abuse, and lack of education. Juvenile incarceration exposes children to trauma, social stigma, and disruption of education, significantly reducing their chances of rehabilitation and increasing the risk of reoffending.<sup>280</sup> Without appropriate support systems, diversion programmes, and child-friendly procedures, the justice system risks criminalising vulnerability rather than addressing its root causes.

### Juveniles in Detention

If children are suspected or accused of having committed an offence, they may be detained, tried or sentenced. The information available from the Prison Departments primarily relates to children who are in custody, either as undertrial prisoners or as convicted offenders who have been found guilty.

Table 60: Juvenile Population in Detention Centres as on 31 Dec 2024					
Regions	Undertrials		Convicted		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Balochistan	9	0	14	0	23
KP	292	2	10	0	304
Punjab	684	0	167	0	851
Sindh <sup>281</sup>	286	0	11	0	297
Total	1,271	2	202	0	1,475

Source: Prisons Department (Balochistan, KP, Punjab, Sindh)

On 31 December 2024, a total of 1,475 juveniles were in custody. These children were detained in all four provinces of Pakistan, including adult prisons, Youthful Offenders Industrial Schools (YOIS), Remand Home Karachi and Borstal Institutes. The overwhelming majority of them - 1,473 - were male, while only 2 female children were reported. The vast majority (86%) were reported as undertrial and only 14% were convicted. Punjab has the highest number of imprisoned children and accounts for more than half of all imprisoned children in the country (58%).

The official number of children in detention at any given time does not fully reflect the extent of children who have come into conflict with the law during the year, as this figure is much higher. For example, 277 children were in detention in Sindh on 31 December 2024 (excluding Karachi Remand Home), a total of 1,362 children experienced detention in the province over the course of

<sup>279</sup>Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2019). General Comment No. 24 on children's rights in the child justice system. United Nations.

<sup>280</sup>State of Children in Pakistan. (2024). Causes and impact of juvenile delinquency.

<sup>281</sup>Include children from Remand Home Karachi (20 Juveniles as on 31st Dec 2024)



2024. There were also children who were released on bail without being detained and were not counted in the population of detention centres.

**Table 61: Juvenile Population in Detention Centres (YOIS) in Sindh (2024) (01.01.2024 to 31.12.2024)**

Regions	Undertrials		Convicted		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Youthful Offenders Industrial School & C.F Karachi	882	0	172	0	1,054
Youthful Offenders Industrial School & C.F Hyderabad	152	0	5	0	157
Youthful Offenders Industrial School & C.F Sukkur	51	0	5	0	56
DP & CF Larkana	93	0	2	0	95
Total	1,178	0	184	0	1,362

Source: Sindh Prisons Department

The types of offences leading to child detention vary in Punjab, KP, Sindh and Balochistan and reflect regional trends in juvenile delinquency. In Punjab, the most common offence among detained children is murder, followed by theft, rape, robbery/dacoity and drug offences. Murder is also the most common offence in KP, with theft and attempted murder also significant. In Sindh, robbery/dacoity is the most common offence among children, followed by theft and drug offences. In Balochistan, murder continues to be the most common offence, with cases of drug-related offences, unnatural offences and theft also being reported.

There have been cases where children have been arrested for committing crimes against other children. During the reporting period from 1 January 2022 to 30 September 2024, a total of 46 children were arrested in ICT for crimes against children.<sup>282</sup> The common offences committed by these children were rape/sodomy, kidnapping/abduction and murder.

#### **Juvenile Offenders Released on Probation (Punjab, Balochistan)<sup>283</sup>**

Probation is a legal measure that allows children to remain in the community under certain conditions, either with a suspended sentence or a deferred judgement. From 2022 to September 2024, Punjab released 307 children on probation, while Balochistan recorded only 10 releases in the same period. The lower number of children released on probation in Balochistan is in line with the overall low number of child offenders in the province.

**Table 62: Children Released on Probation (1 Jan 2022- 30 Sep 2024) in Punjab**

Years	Total	Age Group		Gender		
		11-15	16-17 (under 18)	M	F	X
2022	98	5	93	96	2	-
2023	89	33	56	89	-	-
2024 (1 Jan-30 Sep 2024)	120	34	86	120	-	-

Source: Punjab Probation and Parole Service, Home Department, Govt. of Punjab

<sup>282</sup> Inspector General of Police- Islamabad

<sup>283</sup> Data on probation and parole was not provided by other provinces.

**Table 63: Children Released on Probation (1 Jan 2022- 30 Sep 2024) in Balochistan**

Years	Total	Age Group		Gender		
		11-15	16-17 (under 18)	M	F	X
2022	3	1	2	3	0	-
2023	2	1	1	2	0	-
2024 (1 Jan-30 Sep 2024)	5	1	4	5	0	-

Source: Home Department, Govt. of Balochistan

## Legal and Institutional Framework

The PPC of 1860 sets the minimum age of criminal responsibility (MACR) at 10 years (section 82) and grants conditional immunity to children aged 10–14 years (section 83) if they are not mature enough to understand the consequences of their actions. However, this MACR falls below international standards<sup>284</sup> and disregards the cognitive immaturity of children and their capacity for rehabilitation.<sup>285</sup> The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC General Comment No. 24) recommends a minimum age of at least 14 years and urges states to raise the threshold.

Pakistan's juvenile justice framework is primarily governed by the Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA, 2018), which establishes juvenile courts and rehabilitation centres, ensures state-funded legal representation, prohibits the death penalty for children under the age of 18, and introduces diversion mechanisms to resolve cases outside the formal justice system. The Act establishes a restorative framework that fundamentally rejects incarceration as a default response to child offenders. At its core, the system prioritises diversion and community-based rehabilitation through specialised structures. When police first encounter a child in conflict with the law, they are legally obligated to immediately notify probation officers and Juvenile Justice Committees under Section 9, while actively exploring diversion options like counseling or community service per Section 4. Probation officers play a pivotal role in conducting social investigations to identify appropriate non-custodial solutions, which may include family mediation, educational support, or vocational training.

The law mandates that specialised juvenile courts must consider these community-based alternatives as the primary response,<sup>286</sup> with detention permitted only in exceptional cases of violent offences - and even then, in separate Borstal facilities rather than adult prisons. This approach reflects the Act's foundational principle that incarceration represents an absolute last resort, with Section 10(4) explicitly establishing bail as the rule rather than the exception. For the rare cases where detention occurs, the system incorporates safeguards like 72-hour maximum preliminary detention and absolute prohibition of joint trials with adults. The framework extends these protections even to cases involving federal agencies like the FIA,<sup>287</sup> requiring compliance with the JJSA's child-centred protocols regardless of the alleged offense.

<sup>284</sup>Pakistan Observer. (2022, August 15). Implementation challenge & Pakistan's juvenile justice system. <https://pakobserver.net/implementation-challenge-pakistans-juvenile-justice-system/>

<sup>285</sup>Pakistan Observer. (2022, August 15). Implementation challenge & Pakistan's juvenile justice system. <https://pakobserver.net/implementation-challenge-pakistans-juvenile-justice-system/>

<sup>286</sup>Government of Pakistan. (2018). Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018. Islamabad: Ministry of Law and Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.molaw.gov.pk/>

<sup>287</sup>Federal Investigation Agency. (n.d.). About FIA. Retrieved from <https://www.fia.gov.pk/>

## Gaps and Challenges

Despite the passage of the Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018, the rights of children in conflict with the law continue to be undermined by systemic gaps in implementation, legal protection and rehabilitation services.<sup>288</sup>

ICT<sup>289</sup> and Kp<sup>290</sup> have notified the rules under the JJSA 2018, but other provinces have yet to notify the necessary rules under the JJSA 2018, hindering the Act's effective implementation. Access to legal aid remains inadequate as many children have no legal representation during investigations.<sup>291</sup> The CrCP 1898 facilitates bail for children under 16 in non-bailable offences (Section 497) and JJSA 2018 provides the primary framework for bail and pretrial procedures for but under 18, but pre-trial detention remains excessive as children accused of bailable offences are often denied bail due to lack of awareness among law enforcement officials, judicial delays and non-compliance with legal requirements, exposing them to prolonged detention and potential abuse.<sup>292</sup> It exacerbates overcrowding and expose children to prolonged incarceration.<sup>293</sup>

The age determination process is inconsistently applied, with low birth registration rates often resulting in children being adjudicated as adults.<sup>294</sup> Justice Project Pakistan identified 12 cases between 2019–2024 where children were sentenced to death after being wrongfully tried as adults due to unverified age claims.<sup>295</sup>

Observation homes and rehabilitation centres are not established as required by law.<sup>296</sup> There are only five juvenile-specific facilities in Pakistan—two in Punjab (Faisalabad, Bahawalpur) and three in Sindh (Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur).<sup>297</sup> While Sindh has a remand home in Karachi, no such facility exists elsewhere in Pakistan. Many children are detained in general prisons, which are housed in separate barracks but still face harsh conditions. Pakistan's prisons are overcrowded by 152.2%, some even by 200–300%.<sup>298</sup> This has a severe impact on the child inmates and leads to lack of space, poor hygiene and unsanitary conditions. Child prisoners have limited access to vocational training, education, and rehabilitation programmes, which undermines their reintegration into society.

Juvenile Justice Committees (JJC)s, which were introduced as diversion mechanisms, remain non-existent in many districts.<sup>299</sup> Only eight committees have been notified in recent years across a few districts,<sup>300</sup> out of the approximately 160 districts where the JJSA requires an active

<sup>288</sup> Ijaz, A., Madni, A., & Akhtar, N. (2021). Implementation of Juvenile Justice System Act 2018: Prospects and Challenges for Pakistan. *Review of Politics and Public Policy in Emerging Economies*, 3(1), 79–85.

<sup>289</sup> State of Children. (2023). KP government approved Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA) rules. Retrieved from <https://stateofchildren.com/kp-government-approved-jjsa-rules/>

<sup>290</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (n.d.). Treaty body report on implementation of JJSA rules in ICT. Retrieved from [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=X9WRXYEFPD3YN83O2aJJA07PGcSyfwK5jko7+HE4i7RlfcNk5D5EBVNkq2gEO7g](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/DownloadDraft.aspx?key=X9WRXYEFPD3YN83O2aJJA07PGcSyfwK5jko7+HE4i7RlfcNk5D5EBVNkq2gEO7g)

<sup>291</sup> Research Society of International Law. (2023). Determination of Age & Maturity under Juvenile Justice System of Pakistan. <https://rsilpak.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Determination-of-Age-Maturity-under-Juvenile-Justice-System-of-Pakistan.pdf>

<sup>292</sup> Dawn. (2023, April 7). Implementation of juvenile justice system urged. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1844669>

<sup>293</sup> THE PRISONS CRISIS OF PAKISTAN – SOHRIS. (2025, February 24). <https://sohris.com/the-prisons-crisis-of-pakistan>

<sup>294</sup> Legal Awareness Watch. (n.d.). The Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018.

<https://legalawarenesswatch.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/JUVENILE-JUSTICE-SYSTEM-ACT-2018-final-1.pdf>

<sup>295</sup> Justice Project Pakistan. (2024). Growing up on death row: Child offenders in Pakistan. <https://www.justiceprojectpakistan.org/reports>

<sup>296</sup> State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). The Juvenile Justice System Act of 2018. <https://stateofchildren.com/jjsa2018/>

<sup>297</sup> THE PRISONS CRISIS OF PAKISTAN – SOHRIS. (2025, February 24). <https://sohris.com/the-prisons-crisis-of-pakistan>

<sup>298</sup> THE PRISONS CRISIS OF PAKISTAN – SOHRIS. (2025, February 24). <https://sohris.com/the-prisons-crisis-of-pakistan>

<sup>299</sup> Paradigm Shift. (2020, December 14). The Juvenile Justice System Act, 2018 in Pakistan. <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/juvenile-justice-system-act-2018/>

<sup>300</sup> Bhatti, N. F. (2025, January 19). Where is the tender face of justice. *The Express Tribune*.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2523078/where-is-the-tender-face-of-justice>

committee in each. Probation and parole systems remain underutilised due to understaffing, underfunding, and the lack of proper social investigations in many cases. There are 75 probation and parole officers in Punjab, including 15 female officers; 30 officers in Balochistan (including 4 female officers); 28 probation officers (including 2 female officers) and 2 parole officers in KP; and 16 probation officers (1 female officer) and 14 parole officers in Sindh. Probation officers, who play a leading role in rehabilitative sentencing, are often not notified by the police, limiting their ability to support case management and diversion.<sup>301</sup> Although child offenders are released on probation to some extent, parole has rarely been granted to children. The availability of juvenile courts remains inadequate, with only 13 courts notified<sup>302</sup> which limits children's access to specialised court proceedings. Moreover, contradictory laws, such as the Anti-Terrorism Act (1997), expose juveniles to harsh punishments, including life imprisonment, despite the protection granted under the JJSA.<sup>303</sup>

### Recommendations to Address Gaps in the Juvenile Justice System

Reforms are needed to address the shortcomings in Pakistan's juvenile justice system and to ensure its alignment with national laws and international standards.

#### 1. Legal Reforms and Enforcement

- Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan should expedite the enactment of Rules of Business for the operationalisation of the JJSA 2018 in respective provinces
- Amend the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, to ensure that juveniles charged under the Act are treated in accordance with the protections offered by the JJSA.
- Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility in Pakistan to align with international standards and the Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommendations.
- Develop and enforce standard operating procedures (SOPs) for police officers handling juvenile cases, with a focus on non-violent and child-sensitive approaches.
- Ensure the establishment of Juvenile Justice Committees in all districts, with dedicated resources and personnel, and conduct training programmes for JJC members.
- Establish exclusive juvenile courts in all districts to handle cases efficiently and reduce the burden on existing courts.
- Introduce mandatory measures to protect juveniles' privacy during court proceedings, such as closed hearings and anonymisation of case details.

#### 2. Enhancing Access to Legal Assistance

- Operationalise the Legal Aid and Justice Authority (LAJA) to ensure timely and effective legal aid for juveniles in need. Establish a dedicated mechanism to link LAJA with children in need of legal assistance to enable rapid identification and response to cases.

<sup>301</sup>State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). Gaps and Challenges - Juvenile Justice.

<https://stateofchildren.com/juvenile-justice-in-pakistan/gaps-and-challenges-juvenile-justice/>

<sup>302</sup>State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.). Where is the tender face of justice? – the state of children in Pakistan.

<https://stateofchildren.com/where-is-the-tender-face-of-justice/>

<sup>303</sup>Pak NGOs. (2018, October 1). The Juvenile Justice System Act 2018 - An Overview.

<https://pakngos.com.pk/the-juvenile-justice-system-act-2018-an-overview/>

### 3. Effective Role of Probation Officers

- Recruit additional probation officers to manage the caseload and provide transport and communication facilities to facilitate their fieldwork and court appearances ensuring their presence in all cases.
- Provide regular training to probation officers on child rights, communication with juveniles, and preparation of Social Investigation Reports (SIRs).

### 4. Reducing Pre-Trial Detention

- Enforce the provisions of Section 6 of the JJSA to ensure juveniles accused of minor and major offences are granted bail promptly.
- Establish mechanisms to fast-track juvenile cases, particularly those involving pre-trial detention exceeding six months.

### 5. Standardising Age Determination

- Standardise procedures for age determination, including guidelines for using medical examinations like ossification tests, while minimising reliance on outdated or non-standardised methods.

### 6. Establishing Observation Homes and Rehabilitation Centres and Provide Services

- Build observation homes in all districts under JJSA Act, 2018, ensuring compliance with JJSA requirements for separating juveniles from adult offenders.
- Transform existing Borstal Institutions, YOIS into fully functional rehabilitation centres with modern infrastructure and trained personnel.
- Increase funding and resources to hire more psychologists and mental health professionals, ensuring that juvenile offenders receive individualised counselling and therapeutic interventions.

### 7. Training and Advocacy

- Raise awareness among law enforcement agencies, lawyers, judges about the provisions of the JJSA, including the statutory right to bail, diversion, and the alternative to detention.

## Children on the Move

The term 'children on the move' includes “children who are directly or indirectly affected by migration and displacement, either internationally across borders or within the same country, including child migrants, children in need of international protection such as refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced children, unaccompanied or separated children, stateless children and children who have been trafficked”.<sup>304</sup>

### How many children on the move?

The scope, scale and distribution of children affected by migration and displacement need to be assessed to determine the prevalence of "children on the move". The main categories of children on the move are analysed separately, as they each have different processes and causes. Despite their differences, there is one commonality: all of these children move or migrate, whether voluntarily or forced, within the country or across borders, for a variety of reasons.

<sup>304</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2017). Children on the move: Key facts and figures.

## 5.7 Internally Displaced People (IDPs)

Internal displacement is a recurring issue in Pakistan caused by natural disasters, conflicts and socio-political instability. These crises have a severe impact on people's lives as they disrupt access to livelihoods, education, healthcare and basic services, leaving the affected people in a prolonged precarious situation. Children endure the harshest consequences, including interrupted schooling, heightened risks of exploitation, and reduced access to nutrition and healthcare, compounded by significant psychological distress resulting from sudden displacement. Prioritising child protection services, continuity of education, and psychosocial support is essential to mitigating these long-term harms.

### Displacement Trends

The 2022 monsoon floods triggered 8.2 million internal displacements, making it the world's largest disaster-induced displacement event in the last decade.<sup>305</sup> The floods, which affected 33 million people and caused widespread destruction, forced many displaced families to seek refuge outside official relief camps, complicating the distribution of aid.<sup>306</sup> Provinces such as Sindh and Balochistan, which accounted for 90% of flood-related displacement, faced prolonged shelter needs, while recurrent climate shocks such as droughts, extreme heat and flooding from glacial lake outburst floods further weakened community resilience.<sup>307</sup>

Conflict and violence have also contributed to internal displacement in Pakistan. Over the years, insecurity in regions such as Swat, North and South Waziristan and Bajaur has led to mass displacement, with families fleeing militancy, terrorism and violence, with children among the most vulnerable groups. According to the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), there were an estimated 23,000 internally displaced persons in Pakistan in 2023, mainly due to the conflict in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) between 2002 and 2014. 2,800 new internally displaced persons were registered in 2023 alone, mainly due to clashes between the military and non-state armed groups in the Tirah Valley (KP) and communal violence in Punjab.

In 2024, the security situation in Pakistan deteriorated in some parts of KP and Balochistan, causing families to flee violence and military operations.<sup>308</sup> However, the exact number of newly displaced persons who have sought refuge elsewhere for protection remains unknown.

### Legal and Institutional Framework

Internal displacement in Pakistan is primarily due to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and droughts, as well as conflict and violence. While there is no exclusive law for IDPs, their protection and assistance falls under the disaster management framework at both federal and provincial levels. The National Disaster Management Act, 2010, serves as the primary legislative framework that establishes a disaster management system that focuses on risk reduction, preparedness, response and recovery. This is supplemented by provincial disaster management laws, including the Punjab Disaster Management Act 2010, the Sindh Disaster Management Act 2014, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disaster Management Act 2012 and the Balochistan Disaster

<sup>305</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). (2023). Global report on internal displacement 2023. Retrieved from <https://www.internal-displacement.org>

<sup>306</sup> United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (2023). Loss and damage due to climate change: Case studies from Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int>

<sup>307</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2022). Pakistan floods response plan 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.unocha.org>

<sup>308</sup> Child Rights Violation Cases – The State of Children in Pakistan. (n.d.-b). <https://stateofchildren.com/category/knowledgebase/crv-cases/>



Management Act 2011, which address region-specific vulnerabilities, and response mechanisms.

Under the National Disaster Management Act of 2010, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) is the main federal agency overseeing disaster management in Pakistan. Provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs) are responsible for implementing provincial-level response plans, while District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMAs) coordinate local emergency response, resource mobilisation and rehabilitation of the displaced population. To address the specific needs of vulnerable groups, including children, the NDMA has established the Gender and Child Cell (GCC), which focuses on integrating gender and child-specific considerations into disaster management policy and practice.

## Gaps and Challenges

Displacement caused by natural disasters and conflict in Pakistan exposes IDPs, especially children, to high protection risks. A 2022 Multi-Sectoral Rapid Needs Assessment (MSRNA) highlights violence against children, family separation, increasing child marriage, human trafficking and gender-based violence.<sup>309</sup> Displacement has an impact on the mental health of IDP children. The MSRNA 2022 reveals that 35% of boys and 31% of girls show signs of mental health problems. The interruption of schooling during displacement contributes to these mental health issues.<sup>310</sup>

Beyond these concerns, displacement heightened the risk of child labour. In flood-affected areas of Sindh and Balochistan during and after the 2022 monsoon floods, UNICEF reports that children faced increased vulnerability to child labour, driven by poverty, entrenched social norms, and the lack of access to education and social services, disproportionately affecting adolescent girls and boys.<sup>311</sup> Additionally, unaccompanied and separated children in displacement settings face heightened vulnerabilities, including exposure to abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

Weak child protection systems, including inadequate timely case management and referral mechanisms, lead to inconsistent and inadequate support for vulnerable children.<sup>312</sup> Limited disaster preparedness and poor coordination between government agencies hinder effective crisis responses.<sup>313</sup> Children are often overlooked in disaster response planning, leaving many without access to child-friendly spaces, education or essential protection services. Despite their critical importance in coping with trauma, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) remains largely unaddressed in disaster responses.<sup>314</sup>

As IDPs strive to rebuild their lives, they face serious problems such as inadequate shelter, economic marginalisation, and limited access to education, healthcare, and clean water. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement advocate for durable solutions, including voluntary return, local integration, or resettlement in safe and dignified conditions.<sup>315</sup> However, many IDPs often remain trapped in protracted displacement, with limited prospects for return or

<sup>309</sup>Pakistan: 2022 Multi-Sector Rapid Needs Assessment in Flood-Affected Areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh (September 2022). <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-2022-multi-sector-rapid-needs-assessment-flood-affected-areas-khyber-pakhtunkhwa-punjab-and-sindh-september-2022>

<sup>310</sup>UNICEF. (2023). Mental health in displaced child and youth populations.

<https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/3741/file/UNICEF-Mental-Health-Displacement-2023.pdf>

<sup>311</sup>UNICEF Pakistan. (2024). Consolidated emergency report for 2023. <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/5846/file/UNICEF%20Pakistan%20Consolidated%20Emergency%20Report%20for%202023.pdf>

<sup>312</sup>UNICEF Pakistan. (n.d.). Child protection. <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/child-protection-0>

<sup>313</sup>ReliefWeb. (2023). Education in emergencies and child protection joint needs assessment Pakistan 2023.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/education-emergencies-and-child-protection-joint-needs-assessment-pakistan-2023>

<sup>314</sup>UNICEF. (2023). Mental health in displaced child and youth populations.

<https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/3741/file/UNICEF-Mental-Health-Displacement-2023.pdf>

<sup>315</sup>Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. (1998). <https://www.unhcr.org/us/media/guiding-principles-internal-displacement>



integration.<sup>316</sup> Poorly planned rehabilitation efforts, insufficient livelihood support, and ongoing insecurity in conflict-affected areas hinder sustainable recovery.<sup>317</sup> Vulnerable groups, including women, children and persons with disabilities, remain at increased risk of exploitation, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and vulnerability.<sup>318</sup> In Pakistan, there are no specific laws recognising the particular needs and rights of IDPs. The absence of a specific policy for IDPs leads to fragmented responses and an inability to institutionalise protection mechanisms.<sup>319</sup>

### **Key Recommendations for Protecting Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Pakistan**

Pakistan must take immediate and coordinated action to address the crisis of internal displacement, with particular focus on protecting children's rights and wellbeing.

#### **1. Strengthen Legal and Institutional Frameworks**

- Develop a National IDP Policy to provide a comprehensive legal framework for protecting displaced populations, ensuring alignment with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.
- Strengthen the role of DCPUs and integrate them into disaster response frameworks to monitor and safeguard the welfare of displaced children.
- Enforce birth registration in displacement camps to prevent statelessness and facilitate access to education, healthcare, and social services.
- Strengthen early warning systems for climate-related disasters to minimise future displacement risks.

#### **2. Enhance Child Protection in Emergencies**

- Establish Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) in all displacement settings to provide safe environments, psychosocial support, and recreational activities.
- Deploy mobile protection units to identify and assist unaccompanied children, victims of trafficking, and child labourers.
- Integrate mental health support into emergency responses, training community health workers to address trauma and anxiety among displaced children.

#### **3. Ensure Continuity of Education**

- Implement temporary learning centres in camps and host communities to prevent dropouts.
- Provide stipends to displaced families to offset economic barriers to education.
- Train teachers in crisis-sensitive pedagogy to support children affected by displacement and conflict.

<sup>316</sup>Mielke, K., & Schetter, C. (2021). Figurations of Displacement in and beyond Pakistan. TRAFIG Working Paper No. 4. <https://trafig.eu/output/working-papers/figurations-of-displacement-in-and-beyond-pakistan>

<sup>317</sup>Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. (2011). Permanent Crises? Unlocking the Protracted Displacement of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons.

<sup>318</sup>UNHCR. (2015). 2015-2017 Protection Strategy Pakistan.

<https://www.unhcr.org/pk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2018/06/2015-2017-Protection-Strategy.pdf>

<sup>319</sup>Sayeed, A., & Shah, Z. (2017). Displacement, Repatriation and Rehabilitation: Stories and Perspectives from South Waziristan. SWP Working Paper.

#### 4. Improve Livelihoods and Durable Solutions

- Launch cash-for-work and vocational programmes targeting displaced youth and women to reduce reliance on harmful coping mechanisms such as child labour.
- Prioritise land tenure security for IDPs returning to conflict or disaster-affected areas to enable sustainable reintegration.

#### 5. Strengthen Coordination and Data Collection

- Improve inter-agency coordination between government, UN agencies, and NGOs to avoid duplication and ensure equitable aid distribution.
- Establish a centralised IDP database to track displacement trends, needs, and service gaps, disaggregated by age, gender, and disability.

## 5.8 Refugee Children

Refugees are persons who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their ethnicity, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, have been granted protection in another country in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention.<sup>320</sup> This definition includes children who have fled their home country due to conflict, persecution or serious harm and have been granted refugee status. Asylum seekers are persons who have applied for international protection in another country and are awaiting a decision on their refugee status.

### Refugee Population in Pakistan

According to the UNHCR, there were 1,362,402 registered Afghan refugees living in Pakistan on 28 February 2025. Children make up the largest proportion of the refugee population. Around 53% of Afghan refugees are under the age of 18.

Table 64: Registered Afghan Refugees in Pakistan (8 February 2025)		
Total Population 1,362,402		
Years	Male (%)	Female (%)
0-4	7.30	7.30
5-11 years	12.60	12.10
12-17 years	6.90	6.40
18-59 years	23.80	19.70
60+	2.30	1.60

Source: UNHCR

KP hosts 52.6% of the total refugee population, followed by Balochistan and Punjab. Between 15 September 2023 and end of February 2025, a total of 842,429 Afghan nationals were repatriated from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Among the repatriates, children made up about 59% of the population (UNHCR).

<sup>320</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2023). UNHCR guidelines on child asylum claims under the Refugee Convention.

**Table 65: Afghan Refugees in Pakistan<sup>321</sup> (Feb 2025)**

Province/Region	Population	%
KP	716,406	52.6%
Balochistan	326,763	24%
Punjab	197,086	14.5%
Sindh	74,673	5.5%
ICT	42,995	3.2%
AJK	4,479	0.3%

Source: UNHCR

### Educational Status of Afghan Refugee Children

Amidst the education crisis in Pakistan, leading to the declaration of an education emergency by the government, refugee children face additional barriers, including limited school access due to insufficient infrastructure and distance, documentation, financial constraints, and gender and cultural challenges, with girls disproportionately affected. The policy environment in Pakistan allows for the integration of Afghan refugees into the national systems, yet inclusion happens unevenly.

The Documentation Renewal and Information Verification Exercise (DRIVE) carried out jointly by the Government of Pakistan and the UNHCR in 2022 provides important insights into the educational status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Of the total registered refugees, 52% were children under the age of 18. The data shows that there were significant challenges in education for refugees at all levels.

- **Access to Education**

Refugee children in Pakistan primarily attend one of the 142 UNHCR-supported schools or, in the case of urban refugees, public schools. At the primary level, approximately 22% of refugee children in Refugee Villages are enrolled in UNHCR-supported institutions. Overall, based on partner estimates, around 28% of school-aged refugee children have access to either UNHCR-supported or public schools. All 142 Refugee Village schools now follow the Pakistani national curriculum. However, education access and quality remain inconsistent across regions, with higher attainment reported in KP and Sindh (44%), and critically low levels in Balochistan, where 71% of refugees have no schooling.

- **Educational Attainment and Gender Disparities**

According to DRIVE (2022), 69% of PoR cardholders reported no education. Of the 31% who had received some form of education, nearly half (43–49%) had only informal religious education (e.g. madaris), indicating limited access to formal schooling. Educational attainment among refugee women remains particularly low: 61% received only religious education, 27% completed primary school, and just 5% reached secondary level. Overall, 62% of educated individuals were men, and only 38% were women. Education participation is highest among children aged 5–11 (26%), but declines significantly in the 15–24 age group.

<sup>321</sup>Country - Pakistan (Islamic Republic of). (n.d.). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/pak>

## Legal and Institutional Framework

Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, nor has it enacted national laws specifically for the protection of refugees. There are no formal procedures for determining the refugee status of persons seeking international protection on Pakistani territory. As a result, these persons are subject to the provisions of the Foreigners Act 1946.<sup>322</sup> In the absence of a national legal framework for refugees, the UNHCR carries out refugee status determination under its mandate as set out in the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (adopted by General Assembly Resolution 428 (V) on 14 December 1950). This arrangement is formalised by the 1993 Cooperation Agreement between the Government of Pakistan and the UNHCR. Pakistan recognises the UNHCR's decisions on granting refugee status and allows both asylum seekers (whose applications are still under consideration) and recognised refugees to stay within its borders while seeking durable solutions.<sup>323</sup> Pakistan recognises the UNHCR's decisions on granting refugee status and allows both asylum seekers (whose applications are still under consideration) and recognised refugees to stay within its borders while seeking durable solutions.

Important state and international agencies are working together to care for the refugees in Pakistan. The Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan and States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON) oversees refugee policy and coordinates efforts with the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR) and its provincial offices, which are responsible for coordinating with UNHCR and relevant authorities on refugee affairs. The Ministry of Interior regulates the legal status of refugees in accordance with the Foreigners Act 1946 and deals with issues such as entry, residence and movement. NADRA supports the documentation of refugees through record keeping and identity verification, especially for Afghan refugees.<sup>324</sup>

## Gaps and Challenges

As a host country, Pakistan has ethical and international obligations to ensure that all children enjoy protection and access to fundamental rights without discrimination. Children, regardless of their legal status in Pakistan, whether documented or undocumented, are among the most vulnerable populations in Pakistan. Born into displacement or forced to migrate due to crises beyond their control, they bear no responsibility for their precarious circumstances.

The lives of refugee children in Pakistan are anything but safe as they struggle to access basic rights such as education, healthcare and protection. Undocumented children are even more vulnerable as they live in constant fear of deportation, family separation and exclusion from essential services.<sup>325</sup> Economic hardship forces many refugee children into hazardous labour;<sup>326</sup> they work as scavengers, street vendors, domestic workers, or are pushed into begging, exposing them to exploitation and abuse. A significant number, particularly those displaced from Afghanistan in 2021 or later, or those in protracted displacement situations, are highly vulnerable to abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation, and family separation. In Pakistan, these children face multiple protection concerns, including child labour, early marriage, gender-based violence, and exposure to psychological distress. Many lack proper documentation, which further heightens their vulnerability to exploitation.

<sup>322</sup> UNHCR. (2023). Global trends: Forced displacement in 2022.

<sup>323</sup> UNHCR. (1993). Cooperation Agreement between the Government of Pakistan and UNHCR. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org>

<sup>324</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). (2023). Collaboration and coordination in refugee management in Pakistan.

<sup>325</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council. (2023). The forgotten millions: Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://www.nrc.no>

<sup>326</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). (2023). Child labour among refugee communities in South Asia.

Education remains out of reach for many refugee children, especially girls, due to cultural restrictions, security concerns, financial constraints, and systemic exclusion. According to UNHCR, 61% of Afghan refugees have no formal education.<sup>327</sup> Many children rely solely on religious education, limiting their prospects of integration into formal schooling. Although the Constitution of Pakistan provides for free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of five and 16, in practice, admission of refugee children to public schools is at the discretion of school principals. Forcibly displaced children who arrived after 2021 face even greater barriers due to ambiguity surrounding their legal status. As a result, public schools often refuse admission to refugee children, compounding their marginalisation. National and provincial level policy reforms and a related support strategy are urgently needed to expand educational access to refugee children.

Many Afghan families, particularly in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, avoid seeking essential services, including medical assistance and education for fear of prosecution. According to the International Rescue Committee, these obstacles lead to preventable health crises and malnutrition, while studies by Refugees International highlight the increased risk of mental health disorders in undocumented children.<sup>328</sup> The political instability in Afghanistan has left many refugee families in a state of uncertainty, they do not want to return home.<sup>329</sup> Discrimination and harassment, especially under the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP), make life even more difficult and challenging, with families reporting verbal abuse, detention and extortion.<sup>330</sup> It exposes children to significant protection risks throughout the deportation process, particularly during detention and border crossing. These risks included family separation, physical safety and security and psychological distress. Children who are separated from their families are more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and neglect. During the IFRP, children along with men and women were kept in holding sites/transit centers which lacked a mechanism for identifying and addressing child protection cases.

Integrating asylum-seeking and refugee children into child protection systems would enable them to receive specialised services aligned with their best interests. However, the absence of clear government policies and the unclear legal status of newly arrived Afghan children have significantly hindered their access to basic services. Strengthening the inclusion of refugee children not only fulfils Pakistan's international obligations but also advances national interests by fostering social stability and reducing children's vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking.

### **Key Recommendations for Protecting Refugee Children in Pakistan**

Pakistan must strengthen its protection framework for refugee children, ensuring their rights to safety, education, and healthcare are upheld.

#### **1. Legal and Policy Reforms**

- Develop a national refugee policy that explicitly safeguards children's rights, including access to education, healthcare, and protection from exploitation.
- Ensure birth registration for all refugee children to prevent statelessness and enable access to essential services.

<sup>327</sup> UNHCR. (2022). Education challenges for Afghan refugee children in Pakistan.

<sup>328</sup> International Rescue Committee (IRC). (2023). Healthcare barriers for Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

<sup>329</sup> Refugees International. (2022). Afghan refugees: The impact of political instability on displaced families.

<sup>330</sup> UNHCR. (2024). Pakistan-Afghanistan returns emergency response: As of 5 November 2024. UNHCR. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org>

## 2. Education Access and Inclusion

- Mandate the admission of refugee children in public schools, prohibiting discrimination based on documentation status.
- Expand alternative learning programmes for out-of-school children, including accelerated education and vocational training.
- Address gender disparities through targeted initiatives to enrol refugee girls, including community awareness campaigns and safe transportation solutions.

## 3. Child Protection Services

- Develop child-friendly, safe, and recreational spaces in urban and peri-urban areas to support the emotional and social well-being of displaced and refugee children.
- Make child protection services accessible based on age and residence rather than documentation or registration status. This ensures that all children, regardless of their legal or registration status, can access essential services.
- Establish dedicated child protection units or committees in refugee-hosting areas to identify cases of abuse, trafficking, and forced labour, and report to DCPUs for action.
- Implement standardised procedures to prevent family separation during deportation or detention, with special safeguards for unaccompanied minors.
- Provide psychosocial support in schools and communities to address trauma among refugee children.

## 4. Healthcare and Nutrition

- Ensure equitable access to healthcare facilities for refugee children, including immunisation and maternal/child health services.
- Integrate MHPSS services into child protection frameworks to address the psychological distress caused by displacement

## 5. Livelihoods and Social Protection

- Extend social safety nets to refugee families to reduce reliance on child labour and early marriage as coping mechanisms.
- Support livelihood programmes for refugee youth and women to foster self-reliance and reduce exploitation risks.

## 6. Cross-Border and Regional Cooperation

- Promote voluntary, safe, and dignified repatriation for refugees while ensuring reintegration assistance in Afghanistan through bilateral agreements and international collaboration.
- Collaborate with international organisations to advocate for long-term solutions, including third-country resettlement where necessary.



## 5.9 Alternative Care

Alternative care refers to care arrangements for children who cannot live with their biological parents and can be broadly categorised into non-residential and residential care settings.<sup>331</sup> The UN Guidelines on Alternative Care emphasise that family-based care should always be prioritised, with institutional care used only as a last resort and for the shortest possible duration.

Non-residential care includes various forms of child placement outside institutional settings. Kinship care refers to extended family members or close friends assuming caregiving responsibilities, providing children with a familiar and supportive environment and is the most common form of alternative care in Pakistan.<sup>332</sup> Foster care, which provides temporary placement with officially recognised and registered families, remains underdeveloped in Pakistan. There are no legal provisions covering foster care, limiting its effectiveness as an alternative care option.<sup>333</sup> Adoption in Pakistan is limited due to cultural and religious factors, as formal adoption—where a child legally takes the adoptive family's name and inheritance rights—is generally not recognised under Islamic law. Instead, guardianship (Kafala) is preferred, allowing families to care for orphaned or abandoned children while maintaining their original identity and inheritance rights. These religious and societal norms contribute to the limited practice of adoption in the country. Organisations such as the Edhi Foundation facilitate the care and placement of orphaned and abandoned children through guardianship arrangements (Kafala), in line with Islamic principles and local legal frameworks.<sup>334</sup>

### Children without Parental Care

While most children in Pakistan are raised by their parents, there are a significant number of children who do not receive parental care often due to parental death or separation, migration or economic hardship. A 2021 UNICEF report estimates that over 4 million children in Pakistan have lost one or both parents.<sup>335</sup> The MICS surveys shed light on the situation in Punjab, Sindh, KP and Balochistan and show different categories of children without parental care. Children who have lost both parents are relatively rare, although their numbers are slightly higher in Sindh and Balochistan, especially among older children. Some children live apart from both parents, with Sindh reporting a slightly higher prevalence of this situation. In KP, more children have parents living abroad, a trend that is less prevalent in other provinces. The largest group consists of adopted, fostered or stepchildren, particularly in KP and Sindh, where younger children are more commonly reported, but Punjab and Balochistan also have children in this category, albeit in smaller numbers.

Table 66: Adopted, Foster, or Stepchild (%)					
Province	0-4 years	5-9 years	10-14 years	15-17 years	Total
Balochistan	9.3	8.2	2.4	1.7	3.7
KP	32.7	11.8	6.2	2.0	6.9
Punjab	-	-	-	-	9.4
Sindh	24.1	13.6	4.0	0.8	-

Source: MICS (Balochistan 2019-20, KP 2019, Sindh 2018-19, Punjab 2017-18)

<sup>331</sup>UNICEF. (2010). Guidelines for the alternative care of children.

<sup>332</sup>UNICEF. (2004). Kinship care: An overlooked but important care option for children.

<sup>333</sup>SOS Children's Villages International. (2016). Alternative care in South Asia: Challenges and recommendations

<sup>334</sup>Edhi Foundation, accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.edhi.org/>

<sup>335</sup>UNICEF, Situation of Children in Pakistan 2021



## Mapping & Assessment of Residential Care Facilities (RCFs) in Punjab<sup>336</sup>

The 2022 mapping and assessment of Residential Care Facilities (RCFs) in Punjab conducted by Burgad with the support of CP&WB and UNICEF provides important insights into alternative care options for children. The study covered government-run institutions, NGO-run institutions, drop-in centres and madaris registered as orphanages (excluding educational institutions like boarding schools). The study found that 5,762 children are accommodated in RCFs. This equates to 12 children per 100,000 of the child population, with the number of boys (68%) significantly higher than girls (32%). This disparity reflects societal norms that favour family care for girls. The majority of the children were between 10 and 14 years old, while the younger girls were between 0 and 4 years old.

The main findings related to the time spent in institutions were: 78% of children spent more than six months in RCFs. Girls were more likely to be reunited with their families earlier than boys. Over a 12-month period, 613 children left care, primarily through family reunification (75%), but 16% were relocated, 5% ran away and 3% died. Notably, 47% of children had lost both parents, but 87% had relatives nearby, indicating great potential for family reintegration. The report calls for increased efforts to support family-based care and reduce reliance on institutional care.

### Legal and Institutional Framework

Pakistan's legal and institutional framework for alternative care remains fragmented and only partially aligned with international standards. The system operates through a patchwork of laws, including the federal Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 and provincial child protection statutes, which collectively fail to establish a unified, rights-based approach to alternative care. Punjab's Destitute and Neglected Children Act, 2004 support institutional care through CP&WB, with limited legal provision for kinship or foster care. Sindh's Child Protection Authority Act, 2011 and Sindh Orphanages (Supervision and Control) Act, 1976 regulate only registered institutions and do not cover religious facilities such as madrassas, which house a significant number of children. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Child Protection and Welfare Act, 2010 supports residential "Kafalat Ghars" but lacks safeguards against long-term institutionalisation. Balochistan's Child Protection Act, 2016 and the ICT Child Protection Act, 2018 place emphasis on judicial oversight, but fail to establish clear quality standards for care placements or outline non-institutional alternatives.

The institutional framework spans state-run facilities, private orphanages, and religious institutions operating under divergent regulatory mandates. At the federal level, the Child Protection Institute (CPI) in Islamabad offers temporary shelter, rehabilitation, and protection for children at risk. Punjab's CP&WB manages Child Protection Institutes (CPIs) across districts, providing shelter, medical and educational services, and oversight of private facilities. KP's Child Protection and Welfare Commission (KP-CPWC), Sindh's Child Protection Authority (SCPA), and Balochistan's Child Protection Cell play parallel roles in managing care through their respective Social Welfare Departments. However, these structures predominantly support institutional care and offer limited family-based alternatives.

Between January 2022 and August 2024, provincial child protection agencies in ICT, KP and Balochistan have taken measures to support vulnerable children, including efforts focused on kinship care, foster care and community-based care. However, many children remain in residential care, emphasising the need to further strengthen family reunification efforts and expand structured family-based alternatives.

<sup>336</sup> Comparable data for other provinces is currently unavailable, limiting a broader national assessment of residential care trends.

<b>Table 67: Child Protection Measures and Alternative Care Interventions (1 Jan 2022 – 31 Aug 2024)</b>												
Actions Taken	ICT				KP				Balochistan			
	M	F	X	Total	M	F	X	Total	M	F	X	Total
Number of Children Reunified with family	290	20	-	310	256	129	-	385	65	14	-	79
Kinship care	-	-	-	-	287	91	-	387	-	-	-	-
Foster care	-	-	-	-	07	04	-	11	-	-	-	-
Community-Based care	-	-	-	-	181	17	-	198	-	-	-	-
Child-Headed Household (CHH) support	04	04	-	08	173	129	-	302	11	03	-	14
Residential care	02	10	-	-	196	131	-	327	04	01	-	05

Source: Child Protection Institute Islamabad, KPCPWC, Balochistan Child Protection Cell (Sept 2024)

Most alternative care providers, including NGOs, trusts, and religious organisations, operate under broad legislative frameworks such as the Societies Registration Act, 1860 or Trusts Act, 1882, rather than specialised child protection regulations. This has led to a lack of visibility and accountability for informal and faith-based care settings.

### Gaps and Challenges

Pakistan's alternative care system exhibits multiple structural and procedural deficiencies that compromise the protection and development of children deprived of parental care. A critical issue is regulatory fragmentation and limited scope. Provincial child protection laws primarily focus on institutional settings and fail to extend adequate oversight to informal kinship care or other family-based arrangements. For instance, in the ICT, the ICT Child Protection Act, 2018 and its associated rules prioritise the regulation of organisations rather than the best interests of individual children, reflecting an institutional rather than a child-centred approach.

The system is further marked by institutional bias and insufficient gatekeeping mechanisms. Despite international guidelines favouring family-based care, residential care remains the dominant model across jurisdictions. There are no statutory prohibitions on the recruitment or solicitation of children into residential facilities, nor are there formal gatekeeping procedures in place to assess the necessity of separation from families. This increases the risk of unnecessary institutionalisation, which contradicts the principles of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009).

Additionally, there is a lack of minimum care standards and independent inspection mechanisms, particularly for non-institutional forms of care. Data deficiencies and weak monitoring frameworks also pose significant challenges. Most provinces, including ICT, lack centralised, real-time data systems to track children in care and assess the quality of placements. The absence of safe, confidential, and child-friendly complaint mechanisms leaves children in care with little recourse in cases of abuse or neglect. Informal kinship care, though widely practised, remains entirely unregulated and unsupported. Children placed through informal channels remain

outside the state's monitoring frameworks, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, and abuse.

The lack of aftercare services for children ageing out of institutional care presents another serious gap. There is no formal system ensuring transitional support in areas such as housing, education, vocational training, or psychosocial care. This omission significantly heightens the risk of homelessness, re-victimisation, and exploitation for youth exiting care facilities.

The emergency and humanitarian contexts, such as natural disasters or displacement, exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. The current legal and institutional frameworks do not adequately address the needs of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). In the absence of robust emergency response protocols, these children often fall through the cracks, with limited assessments or safeguards prior to temporary placements.

### **Key Recommendations for Strengthening Alternative Care in Pakistan**

Pakistan must reform its alternative care system to prioritise family-based solutions and ensure the protection and well-being of children without parental care.

#### **1. Strengthen Legal and Policy Frameworks**

- All provinces should develop and implement alternative care policies that prioritises family-based care (kinship and foster care) and limits institutionalisation to a last resort.
- Amend provincial child protection laws to include clear standards for kinship and foster care, ensuring oversight and support for all care arrangements.
- Prohibit unnecessary institutionalisation by introducing gatekeeping mechanisms to assess family separation cases before placement in residential care.
- Amend the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890, to include broader provisions for adoption, aligning with international standards such as the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.
- It should be mandatory to register all children placed in institutions with the provincial child protection authorities.

#### **2. Promote Family-Based Care**

- Expand kinship care support programmes, providing financial assistance, counselling, and monitoring to relatives caring for children.
- Develop a formal foster care system with trained, accredited foster families and structured supervision by child protection agencies.
- Strengthen family reunification efforts for children in institutions,

#### **3. Improve Residential Care Standards**

- Enforce minimum care standards for all institutions (government-run, NGO-operated, and religious facilities), covering safety, education, and psychosocial support.
- Mandate regular independent inspections of residential facilities to prevent abuse and neglect.

- Require care institutions to implement structured case management tailored to the specific needs of each individual child and ensure its integration with the provincial child protection case management and referral system.
4. Enhance Monitoring and Data Systems
    - Establish a database or a system to track children in alternative care, including kinship, foster, and residential placements.
    - Develop child-friendly complaint mechanisms to report abuse or neglect in care settings.
    - Conduct periodic audits of informal care arrangements (e.g., madrassas) to ensure compliance with child protection standards.
  5. Support Transition to Adulthood
    - Introduce aftercare programmes for youth ageing out of care, including housing, vocational training, and mental health services.
  6. Address Emergency Situations
    - Develop emergency protocols for unaccompanied/separated children (UASC) in disasters or displacement, ensuring immediate family tracing and temporary care safeguards.
  7. Raise Awareness and Capacity Building
    - Launch public campaigns to promote family-based care and discourage unnecessary institutionalisation.
    - Train judges, social workers, and caregivers on children's rights, trauma-informed care, and reintegration strategies.

### **Pakistan Pledges to Ending Violence Against Children at Global Ministerial Conference**

Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to eradicating violence against children when its delegation attended the first Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence against Children in Bogota, Colombia in November 2024. The delegation, led by Ayesha Raza Farooq, Chairperson of NCRC, and Sarah Ahmad, Chairperson of CP&WB Punjab, joined representatives from 143 countries. Hosted by Colombia in partnership with Sweden, UNICEF, the United Nations and the World Health Organisation, the conference aimed to accelerate efforts to achieve the SDG of ending violence against children by 2030.

At the conference, Pakistan made two important pledges. First, it pledged to strengthen integrated child protection services by 2027, strengthen district-level protection units, enact child protection laws and build a gender-sensitive, child-sensitive workforce to support over 28 million children and their families. Secondly, Pakistan is committed to promoting positive parenting practises and non-violent discipline by implementing nationwide programmes with tools to create a nurturing environment for children. In her address, Ayesha Raza Farooq reiterated Pakistan's determination to protect all children from violence, backed by robust laws, inter-agency coordination and adequate financial resources.

*Source: NCRC*

## 6. Children's Right to Participation

Right to participation not only recognises children and adolescents as passive recipients of care and protection by the adults, but also enables them to become active agents of change capable of influencing their own lives and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Child participation is one of the four guiding principles of UNCRC. This right is explicitly articulated in Article 12 of the UNCRC which states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and that these views must be given due weightage keeping in mind their age and cognitive abilities. *This chapter examines the right to child participation in Pakistan, identifying obstacles that hinder its fulfilment and proposing ways to strengthen its implementation for a more inclusive and equitable society.*

### 6.1 Situation in Pakistan

Child participation is an evolving area globally and in Pakistan which is increasingly being recognised as a crucial part of decision and policy making processes. According to General Comment No. 12 of the UNCRC, effective child participation must be voluntary, respectful, inclusive, and safe.

The participatory process can be seen in the sector of education, family decision-making, legal and judicial processes, policy and advocacy, and the media. The degree of participation and effectiveness varies according to the socio-economic, cultural and institutional context but there is no officially disaggregated data on number of children participating in the aforementioned domains, making it challenging to quantify their involvement or assess the impact of their contributions. A holistic, lifelong and rights-based skills-building at an early age is essential for meaningful participation of children and adolescents at social and policy level and promote volunteerism. Life-based skills enhance the potential of children and adolescents and enable them to apply knowledge meaningfully and make constructive contributions to their communities and society.

#### Children's Participation in Schools

Children's participation in policy interventions in their respective educational institutes includes multiple levels of engagement, from formal structures such as student councils to informal mechanisms such as classroom discussions and extracurricular activities including debates, declamations and sports. At the highest level, student councils serve as elected bodies where children represent their peers in discussions about school rules, events or policies. Similarly, class representatives, often elected within the class, act as intermediaries between students and teachers and the management and voice the concerns of the class. Many schools also encourage students to participate in clubs and societies, such as sports, drama, debating, hiking and environmental clubs, where children can explore and hone their leadership skills, creativity and teamwork. In schools, participation may also include students providing feedback on teaching methods used in schools, curriculum preferences, school facilities and complaints handling system, thus fostering a sense of ownership and student involvement.<sup>337</sup>

<sup>337</sup>Fielding, M. (2011). Student voice and the possibility of radical democratic education: Renewing our commitment to an education for the common good. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(3), 399–412

In a notable demonstration of child participation and democratic practice, students across Punjab elected 61,212 student council office bearers on 16 May 2024. More than 3.47 million students participated in the elections, which were held in 15,303 middle and high schools for boys and girls of Punjab, and cast their votes to elect presidents, vice-presidents, general secretaries and class representatives.<sup>338</sup> The voting process mirrored that of general elections and included candidate nomination, campaigning and even the use of ballots. This fostered a sense of civic engagement, importance of democratic values and empowerment among students.

The implementation of participatory mechanisms also varies across government, private, and religious schools as well as urban and rural areas, and between boys and girls.<sup>339</sup> Well-established private schools, especially in urban areas, have student councils and engage children in extracurricular activities/clubs, however, this is not necessarily the case for all private schools.<sup>340</sup> Community-level platforms in rural regions, such as child rights clubs or village committees, exist only sporadically, often limited to NGO-supported initiatives. Initiatives such as the Girl Guides and Boy Scouts provide valuable opportunities for participation, focusing on civic responsibility, leadership, and life skills. Multilateral and bilateral organisations, including UN agencies and the EU, have contributed to promoting participatory platforms, particularly through technical assistance and pilot models in public schools and community settings. However, participation in such initiatives is often limited by school engagement, socio-cultural norms, and resource constraints, particularly for girls in rural areas.<sup>341</sup>

### Children's Participation in Family Contexts

Children's participation within families refers to their inclusion in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Key areas may include decisions about their education, healthcare or other important matters concerning the family such as migration. Participation may also extend to daily household dynamics and responsibilities, which vary across families, particularly in the roles traditionally assigned to boys and girls.

The extent of children's participation varies based on socioeconomic status, gender, rural-urban divides, and family structures. In urban, middle-class families, children are often involved in education-related decisions. Family dynamics in joint families tend to dilute individual voices, while nuclear families may provide more space for children to be heard.<sup>342</sup> Societal expectations often limit children's participation to specific areas deemed “appropriate” by adults, rather than allowing them to engage in broader decision-making processes.<sup>343</sup> Gender significantly influences participation dynamics, with boys typically granted greater freedom of expression and autonomy in domestic decision-making compared to girls.

Several structural and cultural bottlenecks hinder effective child participation in the family context in Pakistan. Many households function within hierarchical norms, where decisions are made solely by adults and questioning them is considered disrespectful. In rural or low-literacy settings, there is often limited awareness among parents of children's right to be heard as enshrined in the UNCRC. In economically marginalised families, poverty and survival needs take precedence, leaving little space to consider children's views in choices related to work,

<sup>338</sup> Dawn (2024). Student councils elect officials in Punjab – The State of Children in Pakistan. <https://stateofchildren.com/student-councils-elect-officials-in-punjab/>

<sup>339</sup> Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–117.

<sup>340</sup> UNICEF. (2019). *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education*. UNICEF.

<sup>341</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2012). *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Youth and skills—Putting education to work*.

<sup>342</sup> Save the Children. (2020). *Barriers to children's participation: Socio-cultural dynamics in South Asia*.

<sup>343</sup> Save the Children. (2020). *Barriers to children's participation: Socio-cultural dynamics in South Asia*.



schooling, or healthcare. Gender norms, particularly in rural communities, reinforce control over girls' voices and movements, making their participation even more restricted.

One area of particular concern- where child participation is not only neglected but also frequently misrepresented- is child marriage. Pakistan is home to one of the highest numbers of child brides globally, with an estimated 21% of girls married before the age of 18 and 3% married before the age of 15.<sup>344</sup> With the exception of Sindh, all other provinces legally allow the minimum marriageable age of girls to be 16 years.<sup>345</sup> While marriage, as a legal contract, requires the free and informed consent of both parties, in cases involving children, this principle is routinely undermined by familial pressure, cultural expectations, and gender-based power dynamics. Children, especially girls, are often coerced into giving consent without fully understanding the consequences, such as health risks, disruption to education, or loss of personal autonomy.<sup>346</sup> In some cases, children appear to consent voluntarily, but this is often the result of cultural conditioning or familial authority rather than a conscious decision.<sup>347</sup> UNICEF's Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) study shows that most girls have no say in determining when or whom they marry. As the CRC Committee emphasised in its 2020 observations, any perceived involvement of children in decisions related to marriage should not be interpreted as participation; rather, it constitutes a violation of their rights.<sup>348</sup> Child marriage remains a harmful practice that obstructs education, compromises health, and erodes autonomy, particularly in rural and low-income contexts, where such practices are most prevalent.

Addressing the structural and cultural barriers that hinder children's participation in family contexts such as hierarchical decision-making, limited parental awareness, gender discrimination, and harmful practices, requires a combination of awareness-raising, legal enforcement, and community-based interventions that foster a culture of listening to children. Promising practices in Pakistan include parenting education programmes, such as positive parenting initiatives, which encourage dialogue and respect for children's views in family settings. Community mobilisation efforts led by NGOs and local child protection committees have also created safe spaces for girls to express their concerns. Religious and community leaders, when engaged constructively, can play a pivotal role in shifting harmful social norms by endorsing children's rights to be heard and protected.

### Children's Participation in Legal and Judicial Processes

Children's participation in legal and judicial proceedings falls into two main categories: children in conflict with the law (accused of a criminal offences) and children in contact with the law (victims, survivors, witnesses or parties in civil disputes such as custody or welfare cases).<sup>349</sup> In the context of juvenile justice for children in conflict with the law, the Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018 mandates child-friendly procedures, including the right to legal representation and participation in hearings.<sup>350</sup> For children in contact with the law, such as victims and survivors of abuse, their testimony is often pivotal in legal proceedings as it can provide critical evidence to support their case which may affect the case's outcome. Additionally, in family law matters like custody disputes, courts may consider the child's preferences and best interests when determining living

<sup>344</sup> Girls Not Brides. (2020). Pakistan country profile. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org>

<sup>345</sup> Girls Not Brides. (2020). Pakistan country profile. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org>

<sup>346</sup> UNICEF. (2021). Child marriage in South Asia: An evidence review. UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org>

<sup>347</sup> Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI). (2018). Policy gaps in addressing child marriage in Pakistan. SDPI.

<sup>348</sup> CRC, General Comment No. 12, 2009; CRC, Concluding Observations: Pakistan, 2020.

<sup>349</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). (1989). Articles 12, 37, and 40.

<sup>350</sup> Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018. (Government of Pakistan).



arrangements or guardianship.<sup>351</sup>

In practice, the implementation of children's participation rights varies across different contexts. In custody disputes, the Guardian and Wards Act, 1890, prioritises the welfare of the child. Under Section 17(3), if a child is mature enough to form an intelligent preference, the court may consider child's preferences when making custody decisions. For instance, in the case of *Raja Muhammad Owais v. Mst. Nazia Jabeen and others* (2022 SCMR 2123), the Supreme Court of Pakistan ruled that when a child is mature and capable of expressing reasoned preferences, their views should be considered, always keeping the child's best interests as the guiding principle.

For juveniles in conflict with the law, specialised courts and probation services exist but are limited in scope and unevenly distributed across Pakistan, often resulting in delays and intimidation during proceedings.<sup>352</sup> The implementation of juvenile justice provisions under the JJSA, 2018, remains inconsistent, with many children treated similar to adults during legal proceedings.<sup>353</sup> Moreover, all children in contact with the law, whether as victims, witnesses, or parties to disputes like custody cases, have the right to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings, either directly or through a legal representative, and their views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, as affirmed by the CRC Committee. However, in practice, they often face environments that are intimidating and unsuitable for their participation. Most police stations, courts, and administrative offices lack child-friendly spaces or trained personnel to handle children sensitively. For victims or witnesses, especially in cases of abuse or exploitation, the legal process often retraumatises them, as they are required to testify in the presence of the accused or face invasive questioning.

It is therefore important to adapt legal environments to reduce fear and intimidation. Child-friendly measures—such as judges wearing informal attire, court staff sitting at the same level as the child, and allowing children to be accompanied by a trusted adult—can significantly improve a child's confidence and comfort during proceedings. Familiarising children with the courtroom layout and introducing them to the roles of key personnel before the hearing begins can further enhance their ability to participate meaningfully.

### Children's Participation in Policy and Advocacy

Children's participation in policy and advocacy refers to their engagement in shaping laws, policies, and programmes that directly impact their lives. This participation is facilitated through formal mechanisms such as advisory groups, consultations, or representation in decision-making bodies. An example of this is the NCRC's Child Advisory Panel (CAP). The NCRC plays an important role ensuring structural inclusivity by making child participation an integral part of its structure. The NCRC has two children, a girl and a boy, as its commission members, and has established a Child Advisory Panel (CAP) to further strengthen the voice of children in decision-making processes.<sup>354</sup> Similarly, there is a Parliamentary Caucus on Child Rights, a parliamentary group comprising members of the National Assembly that focuses on advocating for legislative reforms, policies, and oversight mechanisms related to children's rights. While the caucus consists of adult parliamentarians, it consults with children and child rights organisations to ensure that children's voices are heard in policy-making process. These initiatives empower children to contribute to discussions on issues like child protection, education, and healthcare etc. NGOs and civil society organisations also engage children through workshops, policy

<sup>351</sup> Guardian and Wards Act, 1890. (Government of Pakistan).

<sup>352</sup> Save the Children. (2019). Juvenile justice in Pakistan: Challenges and reforms.

<sup>353</sup> SPARC. (2021). State of Pakistan's Children 2020

<sup>354</sup> National Commission on the Rights of Child. (n.d.). Official website. Retrieved from <http://www.ncrc.gov.pk>

dialogues, and advocacy campaigns, providing platforms for them to influence decision-making. For example in 2024, The Thar Alliance launched a Children's parliament in Sindh focusing on education and child rights.

While efforts to involve children in policy matters have grown, their participation remains inconsistent across Pakistan.<sup>355</sup> Children's involvement and engagement are more common in urban areas, where they occasionally participate in consultations on child protection, education, health etc, however such opportunities remain limited and are often ad hoc, with rural areas lacking similar platforms for children to voice their opinions and contribute to decision-making processes. Marginalised and vulnerable children, including those from low-income families, minority communities, transgender children and children engaged in labour, face even greater barriers to participation at each level.

### Children's Participation in Media

Children's participation in media includes the use of traditional and digital platforms to express their views, advocate for their rights, and influence public discourse. While traditional media, such as television, radio, and print, occasionally provide opportunities for children to share their stories or raise awareness about child rights issues, but their viewership is declining.<sup>356</sup> The rise of digital media has transformed the landscape of participation. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube now allow children and adolescents to create and share content, participate in online campaigns, and connect with broader audiences on issues affecting them.<sup>357</sup>

In Pakistan, the potential of digital platforms to support youth-led advocacy and civic participation is increasingly being recognised. Initiatives such as the Digital Youth Hub, launched under the Prime Minister's Youth Programme (PMYP), and the Policy Innovation Lab, developed in partnership with UNICEF, UNDP, and UNFPA under Generation Unlimited (GenU), aim to create enabling environments for digital participation and social action. These platforms offer opportunities for young people to contribute ideas, co-design solutions, and engage with policy processes, particularly through digital means.

However, access to and effective use of media remain deeply unequal. Urban children, especially from better-off households, are more likely to utilise digital platforms for participation and self-expression. In contrast, rural and underprivileged children face multiple barriers, including poor internet connectivity, limited digital literacy, and societal restrictions on technology use. The gender digital divide is particularly concerning, with girls less likely to have access to digital devices or autonomy in using them due to restrictive cultural norms and parental concerns. While digital platforms offer unprecedented reach, they do not always guarantee meaningful or constructive participation. Adolescents' engagement online can be undermined by misinformation, harmful content, and superficial participation. The internet can also expose children to cyberbullying, online harassment, and exploitation, making digital safety a critical concern for any strategy promoting online child participation.

It is recommended that the government invest in digital literacy, safe access, and inclusive content creation, while also strengthening child-centred media policies. These efforts can help promote responsible online engagement and ensure that children's voices are heard and protected across both traditional and digital platforms.

<sup>355</sup> UNICEF. (2021). A global agenda for children's participation. UNICEF. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org>

<sup>356</sup> Digital Rights Foundation (DRF). (2020). Barriers to digital inclusion in Pakistan.

<sup>357</sup> Livingstone, S., & Bulger, M. (2014). A global research agenda for children's rights in the digital age. *Journal of Children and Media*

## 6.2 Legal Framework for Child Participation

Pakistan's legal framework does not include an exclusive law on child participation. Some of the relevant legal provisions include:

- **Constitution of Pakistan (1973)** - Article 19 guarantees freedom of speech and expression for all citizens, including children.
- **National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC) Act, 2017** - Provides for the inclusion of two child members as part of the Commission, ensuring representation and direct participation of children in national-level decision-making on issues related to their rights.
- **Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), 2018** - Provides that children in conflict with the law are heard during judicial and administrative proceedings and mandates child-friendly environments in legal proceedings to ensure their participation and protection.
- **The Guardian and Wards Act, 1890** - Section 17 allows courts to consider a child's preference, age, and welfare while appointing a guardian.
- **Free and Compulsory Education Acts (ICT, Punjab, Balochistan, KP, Sindh)** - All provinces have enacted compulsory education Acts that include provisions allowing children to address grievances.
- **Child Protection Laws (ICT, Punjab, Balochistan, KP, Sindh)** - All provinces and ICT have enacted child protection laws that allow children to participate in case management and encourage their involvement in decisions affecting their protection and welfare.

## 6.3 Recommendations to Enhance Children's Participation in Pakistan

Enhancing children's participation in Pakistan requires a holistic and inclusive approach to create an environment where every child's voice is heard and valued. This is essential not only for empowering children but also for fostering a more equitable and progressive society.

### Institutionalise Platforms for Meaningful Child Participation

- Map and scale up existing models of engagement, volunteerism and participation through public, private and youth partnership with a multisectoral lens.
- Leverage technology to ensure children have access to online platforms that could help them connect to their peers and collaborate on social action initiatives and voice their opinion.
- Students' councils may be established in all schools- formal and nonformal, including government and religious institutions, to provide children with a platform to voice their concerns and contribute to school governance.
- Schools should be encouraged to establish clubs and societies to promote participation in various fields, such as arts, sports and civic engagement. Ensure that student councils operate under clear codes of conduct that promote diversity, inclusion, and respect for all groups, including children from minority, religious, ethnic, gender, and disability backgrounds.

- All educational institutions, including private schools, must establish complaint-handling systems as part of their school policy to ensure that children's grievances are addressed in a timely and effective manner.
- Community child rights committees may be established to facilitate children's input in local governance and development projects, empowering them to actively engage in decisions that affect their lives and communities.
- Meaningful child participation should be strongly encouraged in consultations for developing child-related policies and programmes at both national and provincial levels to ensure that children's opinions shape outcomes that directly affect them.
- Life-based skills development should be part of the curriculum to enable students to enhance their cognitive, analytical and communication skills for meaningful participation.
- Establish systematic evaluation processes to assess the effectiveness of participation mechanisms, ensuring that strategies are adapted based on children's feedback and changing circumstances
- Train schools and community leaders on best practices for engaging children in a meaningful and ethical manner.

### **Child-Focused Media**

- Electronic and print media should create dedicated programmes and sections for children, promoting voices of children on societal issues.
- The government should support children in creating content on platforms like YouTube and TikTok by offering mentorship and providing necessary resources, such as digital literacy training, content creation workshops, access to safe online spaces, and grants for educational and creative projects.
- Implement strict ethical standards for engaging children in media contexts.

### **Make Judicial and Administrative Processes Child-Friendly**

- All provincial governments must ensure the effective implementation of the JJSA, 2018, in both letter and spirit.
- Establish specialised juvenile courts in all districts to ensure timely and sensitive handling of cases involving children.
- Provincial governments should develop child-friendly spaces in courts, police stations, and administrative offices to create a safe and supportive environment for children.

### **Empower Minority and Marginalised Groups**

- Ensure the inclusion of minority and transgender children in school and community activities, addressing discrimination through awareness and capacity-building programmes, while also exploring the implementation of admission quotas to promote equitable representation and access.

- Develop programmes for marginalised and vulnerable children such as sport activities, drop-in-centers and other platforms where they can share their experiences and advocate for promoting and protecting child rights.

### **Legal Protections**

- Reform and strengthen the enforcement of laws against child marriage, while ensuring that the voices of affected children are heard, respected, and integrated into protection and response mechanisms.
- Provide training for the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and social workers on trauma-informed approaches to sensitively engage with children, ensuring their rights and well-being are prioritised.
- Mandate in-camera hearings for children in contact with the law to safeguard their privacy, minimise trauma, and ensure a child-sensitive judicial process that upholds their dignity and rights.

### **Enhance Policymaking and Governance Involvement**

- Expand opportunities for children to serve on advisory bodies, ensuring equitable participation across all provinces and districts.
- Develop mechanisms to incorporate children's feedback meaningfully into final policy documents and decisions.
- Implement systems where children receive regular updates on how their input is being used.
- Introduce capacity-building programmes to train and prepare children for effective participation in policymaking. This training should focus on developing their understanding of issues, communication skills, and decision-making processes to ensure their contributions are informed, constructive, and impactful.





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