

VOICES OF CHILDREN



Introduction

This chapter presents voices and stories of many young children from different fields. Their voices, stories and lived experiences communicate messages that must be given serious consideration in the local and global contexts. These *voices* and stories stress state and community to steer efforts towards breaking the cycle of abuse and child rights violation.

¹Pakistan was ranked 154th among 189 countries in the United Nations'(UN) Human Development Index (HDI) 2020. It reported that Pakistan has not demonstrated any progress in key educational indicators, such as literacy rate, gross enrolment ratio, and expenditure on education, as compared to the adjoining regional territories. Pakistan has over 80 million children. Pakistan has the world's second highest number (22.8 million) of out of school children. ²Majority of these out of school children are in child labour.

Children in Pakistan are mostly involved in several kind of labour like working as table cleaner in hotels or *dhabas*, domestic workers in private household, washing vehicles in markets, and working as helper in different shops (mostly automobile garages). Most of these kids are observed wearing dirty and torn clothes, while some are without shoes even in winters.

These children on the streets with no future are deprived from the rights of protection, health and education. These innocent souls mature at an age when they are supposed to be celebrating and living a joyful life with nothing to worry about. But their little shoulders are overburdened because they were born poor.³As mentioned earlier,

¹[https://tribune.com.pk/story/2276065/pakistan-ranks-154th-on-uns-human-development-index#:~:text=Pakistan%20was%20ranked%20154th%20among,Index%20\(HDI\)%202020%20rankings](https://tribune.com.pk/story/2276065/pakistan-ranks-154th-on-uns-human-development-index#:~:text=Pakistan%20was%20ranked%20154th%20among,Index%20(HDI)%202020%20rankings).

²<https://nation.com.pk/27-Jan-2018/flowers-on-the-streets-with-no-future>

³<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/745659-22-8m-children-are-out-of-school-in-pakistan>

Pakistan ranks second across the globe with 22.8 million Children out of school falling in the age group of 5 to 18 years. These children represent 44 percent of the total population in this age group. Moreover, approximately five million children between the age of five and nine are not enrolled in schools and 11.4 million adolescents aged between 10 to 14 years are dropping out of school.⁴In the province of Sindh, 52 percent poor children and 58 percent girls are out of school. While in the province of Baluchistan 78 percent of girls are out of school.

These figures are more than enough to jolt national and international communities. Apparently, in this case, like many other cases,⁵the rural areas of Pakistan are affected the most. The children of rural areas do not have basic necessities like education, clean water & food and health services.⁶Interestingly, Article 25-A of the constitution of Pakistan ensures free and compulsory education to the children between the age of five to sixteen years, and the real picture is very different. Millions of children across Pakistan are working hard to make both ends meet. Some are slaves of a greedy shop owner while some work on the roads from dawn to dusk to earn something so their families don't sleep empty stomach.

Covid-19 has damaged the economic and social structure the world over. The pandemic has hit really hard on the poorest countries and its vulnerable groups. These vulnerable groups include people who fall in low income groups and the children of these states are victims of forced labour. Previous reports related to Ebola virus in 2014 revealed that factors like crisis situation play strong role in aggravating the risk of child labour.⁷Cornelius Williams, Associate Director of child protection at UNICEF, stated that in an ongoing pandemic situation, vulnerable communities are facing worst outcomes. They are in dire situation and they have to make new and

⁴<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/691173-3-5-million-children-are-out-of-school-in-sindh-saeed-ghani-tells-pa#:~:text=3.5%20million%20children%20are%20out,Sindh%2C%20Saeed%20Ghani%20tells%20PA>

⁵<https://www.dawn.com/news/1600526>

⁶http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf

⁷<https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>

crucial decision every day regarding their livelihood, definitely a hardship for poor families, to generate income and to spend the little they earn. ⁸These families go below the poverty line and they have to make these ugly choices. In low and middle income countries, the number of children living in poverty increased 15% with approximately 672 million at the end of 2020; stated by UNICEF and Save the Children.

⁹The pandemic has been specifically brutal to the children of the lower class, as more and more children are forced to leave their homes and earn for themselves and their families on a daily basis. Under the open sky, in a cold night, during a rainfall a barefooted little girl or a tiny boy must sell something so his or her family can have something to eat till morning only because the struggle is new every single day. The day and night experiences of these children demands for deeper and systematic understanding. To understand the voices and stories of these children, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with various children and their families in Federal capital of Pakistan Islamabad (ICT) and Rawalpindi Punjab. The researcher approached several children who are working in shops and stalls like automobile garages, food stalls, selling different items on roads and traffic signals, as well as, begging on streets with the aim to know the reasons why they are involved in child labour and what kind of societal issues they are facing?

Main Objectives of interviews:

- To examine the issues and challenges of street children;
- To explore the factors that forced children to work as a labourers;
- To highlight the basic rights of children, like education, food, shelter, health and protection.

⁸<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-and-children-s-rights>

⁹<https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>

Stories of Children:

The voices and stories of children, derived from field data are presented in the forthcoming section. One of the child from the streets of Islamabad told: *“I was born to work irrespective of summer or winter. I have to meet my family expenses at any cost”*. The voice of another boy whose name was Saif Ullah is shared here.

Saif Ullah: “Buy a fresh red rose and give it to your loved one”, a 13 years old boy, Saif Ullah with shining eyes and brown hairs sells flower with this slogan near the country’s parliament building. He is the eldest one in the family after his mother. One of his younger brothers also sells notebooks and pencils at traffic signals. His mother works as a maid in Islamabad. With shivering voice Saif Ullah said “I have to earn around 500 rupees daily to support my mother for purchasing milk, flour, eggs and other food items. When enquired about studies he added: “I left school around four years ago and had to choose the road to earn bread and butter for my family. My dream is to become a teacher one day, who wears clean dress and everyone respects him.” Constitution of Pakistan Article 25-A ensures free and compulsory education for the children between the age of five and sixteen years. Children like Saif Ullah have dreams in little eyes but they are out of school to earn living for survival.

Asim: A 10 year disabled boy was spotted in Rawalpindi market belonging to rural Punjab.

Asim begs with his mother in the market, with Amir lying on a cart and his mother pushing the cart on the roads. Asim shifted with his mother to Federal Capital for an operation long time ago. According to his mother, Asim faces several issues like malnutrition and health care since his birth. “It’s been ten years and his body is not growing. Doctors said he has serious issues with bones and we are here in search of treatment. He is unable to play and I cannot afford his education” said the helpless mother.

Asking about his education and future, his mother replied he can understand everything and due to his medical condition he cannot go anywhere unsupervised. After a specific time, he has to lie down in a certain position in order to relax. How can he go to school?

In Pakistan, approximately 12 million children, 40.2 percent of children under five are currently stunted. National Nutrition Survey reveals that 28.9 percent children are underweight. Pakistan has the highest numbers of stunted children in the world after India and Nigeria.

Zainab: Zainab is a short heighted innocent girl. She is just 9 and begs for money in the streets of F-8 Markaz Islamabad. She is the youngest one among her three brothers and one sister. Her father collects papers from the streets and sells them, while her mother works as a dishwasher and floor cleaner in other people's home. She has never been enrolled in any school. Even in the coldest nights of December, she has no other option than to beg for money on roads. Due to the lack of interest and care from her parents, she wanders in the streets having no social protection. The carelessness and irresponsibility from her parents is destroying her social and moral character. Social protection is essential for children like Zainab. Child sexual exploitation can occur in all communities and amongst all social groups where both boys and girls get targeted. Sexual exploitation of children causes significant damage to their physical and mental health. It can also have profound and damaging consequences to the respective families including siblings. But due to the carelessness and irresponsibility of the state and parents many kids like Zainab have become vulnerable for the beasts who exploit children sexually. Experts also say that the rate of child abuse is higher where children work as a labourers.

Hajira: Hajira is a balloon seller in a local market. She's a single parent of two kids. She got married when she was around 16 in her native town Kasur. She was in school when her father ordered her to quit school and confirmed her marriage with her cousin. He was a driver. The newly married couple moved to majestic Islamabad after few months. Her husband left her when her first baby was about to be born. After few weeks her husband returned home. According to Hajira, her husband is not a gentle man; he takes drugs and smokes in front of her infants. He left Hajira again when she got pregnant with her second child and married another woman. Hajira is just 19 and she has two kids.

Hajira now sells balloons with one kid in her arms and one walking by. Hajira said "I am not educated, I do not have any other option

except working like this and feed my kids, I can't go back to my father's house, it's very odd for our people to be a divorced and live alone with kids. I wish to educate my kids. Child Marriage restraint act 1929 section XIX states that, the minimum age for marriage was 16, however, the new bill passed by Senate of Pakistan which said the minimum age of (Nation, 2021) marriage for female should be 18. Under-age marriage is always considered the main cause of death among girls aged between 15 to 19 during pregnancy and child birth.

Karim: Karim is a boy with shiny eyes who is unable to speak properly as he is only around 5 or 6 years old. He carries a big plastic bag in his little hands at G11 market Islamabad. Barefooted Karim collects paper and plastic stuff from garbage and puts it in his plastic bag. According to him his father also does the same work. Karim is the fourth child of the family and they are total five siblings. He wakes up with sunrise and around 8 o' clock heads to the market without wearing anything on his small white feet, to collect papers or plastic. Karim has nothing sufficient to wear to protect himself from the chilly nights of the Capital. Sadly, in Pakistan, many children's right to health is endangered from their youngest age. Approximately one child out of six dies before the age of five. These deaths are commonly caused by malnutrition or the lack of access to clean water and supplies. Every day, around 1,100 Pakistani children die from diarrhea and illnesses caused due to non-availability of clean water, sanitation, and hygiene. Another factor provoking the early deaths of Pakistani children is the nutritional status of children in Pakistan. It seems like Pakistan has failed so far in protecting children and children rights.

Ahmed: In a rainy night where people were busy with hot soups, tea and enjoying gossips, 13 years Ahmed dreams sitting on the stairs. When he got up and I inquired him about his name and family confidently he replied "I am Ahmed, 13 years old, and living in *katchiabadi* with my family". I asked him about the reason for being there at 12 am, he told me that they are eight siblings and he is the second oldest, his father is disabled and works in fruit market. Shivering from cold, little Ahmed said, "Sometimes I work in local hotels and wash utensils from which I earn one hundred rupees and a free meal of one time." Crying about the financial crisis, Ahmed said,

“I always observe other kids go to school every day while I and my little sister head towards market to sell pens.”

When asked about the harsh weather he replied:“it doesn’t matter we have to sell our pens so our family can sleep with peace”. He went back to stairs and placed down his head on little muddy hands and started dreaming again. That is when I noticed that it was not only Ahmed who was there to earn something, a large number of kids were there too, trying to sell different items.

Amin: Amin is a 10 years old boy, who works at a motor mechanic shop. He unscrews nuts and bolts of car engines. Amin works with his father. “Actually, I love vehicles and car engines, that’s the reason I am here” Amin told us while trying to clean his greasy hands with a dirty cloth. About his education he told us that he left school years ago but used to go to tuition daily before COVID-19 breakout. He said “Our teacher provides tuition with books and pencil without single penny”. When I asked Amin’s father Aleem about children education, he replied, “being poor is ugly here, poor have to choose between earning and education and they have to sacrifice education. I am not against educating my children but our working kids share expenses as I do not have enough resources or support of the government. If I send my kids to school, how will I be able to provide food to my family? Aleem also told me that the number of child labour is increasing with every passing day.

Inam Bibi: The 8 years old Inam Bibi sells color books and pencils with muddy hands in a local market. When asked why she is selling colors and pencils? “I love cartoons and colors” she replied in her sweet and innocent voice. She doesn’t know where her father is. Her elder brother owns a shop of collecting papers, cards and bottles etc. She has two younger brothers, one is studying in Madarassa and other one works with his brother. She was barefooted and wore no jacket or coat to protect her from the cold breeze of winter. She is a girl having pretty smile on her face. Inam Bibi told me that she just wanted to earn money by begging on the road and does not want to study. It is because she has no training about career and future goals. She told me that she has to support her family and the education of younger ones.

Observations:

National Nutrition survey states that in Pakistan micronutrient deficiencies are highly prevalent among children. More than half of Pakistani children (53.7%) are anemic. Approximately 12 million children, 40.2 percent of children under five are currently stunted. It has the highest numbers of stunted children in the world after India and Nigeria.

- Millions of children are out of school, most of them girls, for reasons including lack of schools in their areas, child marriage, and gender discrimination.
- Cornelius Williams, Associate Director of child protection at UNICEF stated that “The pandemic has been specifically brutal to the children of the lower class, as daily more or more children are forced to leave home and earn for themselves and their families.”
- Pakistan has over 80 million children who lack basic needs and 24% of country’s population lives below the poverty line. Pakistan has the world’s second highest number of out of school children.
- Child laborers in Pakistan are mostly involved in several kind of labour like working as table cleaner in hotels or *dhabas*, domestic workers in private household, washing vehicles in market and working as helper in different shops.
- In province Sindh, 52 percent poor children and 58 percent girls are out of school, while in the province of Baluchistan, 78 percent of girls are out of school.
- The government has reserved Rs. 2.931 billion for pre-Primary & Primary Education Affairs for 2020-2 against Rs. 2.83 billion for 2019-20, Rs. 7.344 billion reserved for Secondary Education Affairs & Services for 2020-21 against Rs. 6.718 billion for 2019-20.
- Government of Pakistan did not carry out any survey on child labour in since 1996. Many times provincial and federal government agreed to conduct a nationwide survey on child labour but nothing happened.
- According to a report by WHO (demographics of child marriage in Pakistan) 3 percent of girls are married under 15 while 18 percent under 18 in Pakistan.

- Child marriage is always considered the main cause of death amongst girls aged between 15 to 19 during pregnancy and child birth.
- Where 80 million kids are out of school and a large number engaged in bonded labour. An organization named Sahil reported that chances of child abuse increases 80 percent where children are working as a labor.
- Legislative bodies are inactive in this regard or are working appropriately on child rights.
- Political parties are participating in elections from decades but unfortunately it is observed that issues related to child labour, violence, sexual abuse, early marriage, education and malnutrition are not on the agenda of any political party.
- Laws related to child labour passed by previous governments are yet to be implemented. Every new government drafts new bills and laws for child rights and forgets previous laws.
- There is a Lack of coordination between political parties as well as provincial and federal government.

<https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-of-worlds-children>

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/793859/child-rights-in-pakistan-an-unfinished-agenda>

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/571473-child-rights-in-pakistan>

Recommendation:

- Pakistan has over 80 million children majority of whom lack basic needs.
- 24% of country's population lives below the poverty line.
- First and foremost, government should make policies to control population.
- Approximately five million children between the age of five and nine are not enrolled in schools and ¹⁰ 11.4 million adolescents aged between 10 to 14 years are dropping out of

¹⁰<https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/child-protection-0>

school. 22.8 million Children are out of schools. Government should take drastic measures to enroll more and more children in schools through practical educational policies and awareness programs.

- To prevent malnutrition issues, state should take serious actions against early/under age marriages.
- Malnutrition in Pakistani is directly connected with inadequate nutrition among mothers during pregnancy. There should be a strict national policy to provide special care to mother and child during pregnancy.
- ¹¹Providing Child health facilities is the basic responsibility of state. Article 245 should propagate and state should provide equal rights to every child.
- Government should seek help of non-governmental organizations in conducting surveys to collect accurate data regarding child labour and child issues.
- Government and government institutions should take strict actions against child labour. ¹²Child Protection Unit and domestic police should raid on restaurants, shops and markets which are the hub of child labour.
- There has to be a national co-ordination policy between federal and provincial government. With mutual understanding both governments should draft strict laws against child labour, protection, child marriages and make sure the implementation.

¹¹<https://www.unicef.org/stories/fighting-malnutrition-pakistan-helping-hand-children-abroad>

¹²http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1399370084_544.pdf

- ¹³Government should implement policies, especially for local shops and restaurants to stop cheap child labour.
- Government should focus on family planning and other societal issues that create obstacles towards the development of society.
- ¹⁴A large number of underage girls are working in houses as a maid and face physical punishment. It is really important to stop domestic violence.
- Increase education opportunities for children in urban as well as deprived areas without any discrimination.
- No one is above the law. Government should implement law and take strict actions against perpetrators.
- It is the basic responsibility of state to provide healthy and safe environment to every child.
- Government should increase education budget as much as it can. The budget should be invested on children and their education.
- With the help of NGOs, government should start awareness program for children and parents and spread awareness about education.
- To stop child violence the very first thing is to stop child labour. State should protect every child and give them right to live with dignity and pride.
- ¹⁵Government should take steps against all kinds of violence against children like physical, mental, maltreatment, exploitation and sexual abuse.

¹³<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2280255/child-abuse-feared-to-surge-amid-covid-19>

¹⁴<http://thebalochistanpoint.com/child-labour/>

¹⁵http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1399370084_544.pdf

- Corporal punishment also has negative effects on children psychology. There should be a law for any kind of punishment to children.
- Federal Government has to design a platform where people from everywhere can participate and can contact federal as well as provincial governments and concerned departments to report child violence, abuse, underage marriages and child labour issues.
- Civil society and non-governmental organizations should highlight the issues related to bonded labour, early marriages, child health at different platforms.
- We have to demand and ask political parties and local politicians to create a bridge between human rights activists and legislative bodies through which the activists should be part of legislation.
- Government should focus on vocational programs, especially in deprived and rural areas of Pakistan,¹⁶ to support children learn technical skills for their livelihood.
- Political parties should be more serious about child rights. Their manifesto should focus on child rights and ensure the implementation of law.

¹⁶<https://nation.com.pk/30-May-2018/300-females-complete-vocational-training>

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