

ADVOCACY BRIEF

# THE IMPACT OF CONFINEMENT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN



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for every child

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This advocacy brief has been created on the basis of an advanced rapid study conducted to understand the impacts of confinement measures on violence against children in Pakistan. This brief has been developed in hopes to protect the rights of children in Pakistan during a time of unprecedented hardship and highlight the key impacts stakeholders can have.

Many people have played a role in conducting of this study and formulating this advocacy brief. Firstly, this would not have been possible without the support and guidance of the team at UNICEF Pakistan. We would like to thank MAGENTA for their work in conducting this study and analysis using rigorous social behavioural change understanding. In particular would like to thank Zahir Shah, Elizabeth Robinson, and Ramazah Masood for their leadership on this project.



## BACKGROUND

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic – A challenge for Confined Children**

With over 75.4 million<sup>1</sup> cases worldwide, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt by countless people since March 2020. In response to this global pandemic, Pakistan closed all schools and confinement was widely encouraged across the country and enforced in specific districts.

The closure of schools has impacted millions of children, putting increased pressure on the mental wellbeing of children and caregivers, limiting access to school-based resources such as food, peer support, and counselling and has increased children's proximity to abuse from caregivers. The pre-existing harms and challenges faced by children in many communities have been exacerbated by confinement measures. Confinement and social distancing measures limit social support circles and contact with formal and informal support structures that can provide stress relief—for both children and caregivers. Stress due to increased economic instability, exposure to pandemic-related news, and lack of personal space at home can lead caregivers to more often resort to violence—and to use harsher techniques—as a form of child discipline.

Although these measures were implemented to prevent the spread of the virus, and despite the most severe limitations now being lifted, they represent a significant threat for children confined in their homes. These challenges are further exacerbated and differ in their impact across genders, disabilities, and rural versus urban areas.

### **Calling for Rapid Evidence and Actionable Recommendations**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes children as rights holders, and caregivers as the duty bearers in the achievements of these rights. As such, the impacts of this confinement on children and their wellbeing are paramount to understand if children's rights are to be upheld.

While many short-term and long-term implications are still unknown, it is broadly understood that COVID-19 and its related confinement measures have had a significant impact on violence against children. With children already experiencing physical, emotional, and sexual violence at extremely high rates in Pakistan, investigating the exacerbated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pakistani children at home and in alternative care facilities is vital if these implications are to be understood, recognized, and prevented. To this aim, UNICEF Pakistan commissioned MAGENTA to conduct a rapid longitudinal study between June and October 2020. This rapid study provided keys to understand how confinement has impacted children's experiences of violent discipline at home and in alternative care facilities during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. When possible, it provides data on the differential impacts of confinement on boys and girls, and in urban vs rural settings.

### **Purpose of this brief**

This brief has been developed based on the aforementioned study. This rapid study provided keys to understand how confinement has impacted children's experiences of violent discipline at home and at alternative care facilities during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This brief aims to promote the right of a child to protection from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect during COVID-19 confinement measures in Pakistan. This brief calls on key stakeholders to take concrete steps to reduce violence against children, and provide services to children affected by violence, and to caregivers affected by the pandemic.

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1. WHO as of Dec 21, 2020 <https://covid19.who.int/>

## OVERVIEW OF KEY ASKS

1. Improve caregivers' awareness of the harmful effects of violent discipline, and the impact of COVID-19 on caregivers' use of violent discipline.
2. Support caregivers' use of positive discipline methods that promote the well-being of children.
3. Require ongoing support to caregivers to fortify children's well-being by preventing potential violence in schools.
4. Invest in advanced planning to support caregivers and prevent harm to children during future COVID-19 waves.
5. Increase nuanced understanding of the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls.
6. Implement higher regulations and monitoring mechanisms in Alternative Care Facilities (ACFs) while increasing investment in safer services.
7. Undertake further data collection on the impacts of COVID-19 on children in Pakistan.

## KEY ASKS

### KEY ASK 1:

#### **Improve caregivers' awareness of the harmful effects of violent discipline, and the impact of COVID-19 on caregivers' use of violent discipline**

Study findings show that a significant proportion (over 60%) of caregivers reported having seen or heard "others" have less patience with their children than before the pandemic, and that "others" are using violent methods (such as yelling name calling and pinching) to discipline their children. Additionally, a sizeable proportion (over 80%) of the respondents thought that violence—such as screaming, hitting, and slapping children—has or may have increased during COVID-19. As the COVID-19 confinement continued, caregivers started to have less tolerance with their children, and over 45% reported that it is more difficult to discipline children during confinement.

Further qualitative assessments show that children and adolescents who live with step-parents or step-siblings are deemed the most vulnerable to violence at home, with girls in particular at a higher risk of physical and sexual abuse.

Due to lockdown measures, parents and caregivers are predominantly at home spending the majority of the time in the same physical space. Often, families were already struggling to provide for their children, and the lack of work and income during the lockdown causes further stress and anxiety. As a result, parents and caregivers are increasingly venting their frustrations on children leading to increased occurrences of psychological abuse and physical violence. As such, community-based organizations, schools, and the Government of Pakistan should raise caregivers' awareness of the harmful effects of violent discipline, and the impact of COVID-19 on caregivers' use of violent discipline.

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**KEY ASK 2:****Support caregivers' use of positive discipline methods that promote the well-being of children**

While many of the original lockdown measures have been lifted, caregivers are still stressed about the pandemic and its impact on their daily lives. This stress felt by caregivers is likely to affect children's wellbeing, directly or indirectly.

Study findings show that over 60% of respondents reported that yelling at children and name calling are the main observed discipline methods by caregivers. Additionally, over all three rounds of research, discussions with children as a method of discipline—which can be considered a positive method—declined, while pinching increased significantly.

Additionally, findings further show that a drastically higher percentage of women compared to men respondents report that having children at home all the time is a source of stress. This highlights the disproportionate responsibility of girls and women in Pakistan for child-rearing and household activities, which can increase their stress and make it harder for caregivers to adopt positive discipline techniques.

Therefore, the Government of Pakistan, schools, international organizations, and community-based organizations must support caregivers in promoting positive discipline methods and maintaining a comfortable and calm home life for children, even during stressful times. Promoted methods should include understanding of positive alternatives to violent discipline techniques, including redirecting bad behaviour, reinforcing good behaviour, communicating calmly, and increased discussions regarding pandemic expectations with children. Gendered understanding of the disproportionate pressures of male and female caregivers (in terms of time poverty, caretaking, and nurturing roles) should also be understood.

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**KEY ASK 3:****Support caregivers and teachers to use positive discipline techniques in school and encourage non-violent conflict resolution among students.**

With periods of schools reopening and closing, increased educational opportunities are observed compared to earlier in 2020. However, the return to the classroom also exposes children to violence from their teachers or bullying from peers, who are likely still stressed themselves as a result of the pandemic.

Findings from the study show that crying or throwing tantrums and children fighting with each other were reported to be the primary indicators of stress amongst children. Additionally, as research rounds went on, caregivers responded that significantly more children are socially and/or emotionally withdrawn.

With 35% children engaging in some form of formal or informal educational activity every day and increasing numbers returning to schools, these underlying stressors can result in heightened tension and shorter tempers amongst peers and teachers at school, thus requiring proper outlets and means to deal with high stress levels. Therefore, the Government of Pakistan, schools, and international donors and organizations must support caregivers and teachers to use positive discipline techniques in school and encourage non-violent conflict resolution among students.

It is also important to understand the gendered aspect of children returning to school, as girls are at the highest risk of dropping out of school following COVID-19 school closures. With women and girls facing disproportionate social consequences of this pandemic with increased poverty, household responsibilities, child labour, and early marriage, it is important for resources and efforts to be allocated to ensure maximum support for females returning to classes. Without the implementation of these efforts, Pakistan may jeopardize its progress towards meeting Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4: ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all and SDG 5: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. These setbacks could be detrimental for the success of meeting SDG targets and development efforts at large.

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**KEY ASK 4:****Invest in advanced planning to support caregivers and prevent harm to children during future COVID-19 waves**

As more information about the impacts of COVID-19 are now being analysed and understood, there is an obligation to increase resources and efforts in creating preemptive plans to mitigate further harm in potential upcoming pandemic waves.

With the Government of Pakistan having announced the onset of the second wave of COVID-19, and schools already being closed early for winter vacation, confinement measures are being encouraged once again to contain the spread of the virus. This reclosure may lead to further negative effects of confinement and therefore, **the Pakistani Government must invest in and undertake advanced planning for upcoming COVID-19 waves that are likely to occur.** This includes creating dedicated focal points within the government that focus on policies and programs that prioritize the protection of children amidst pandemic measures.

These programmes should include increased investment towards understanding and implementing Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services for caregivers that allows for stress management, self-care, soft programming, and tools to manage anxiety. As mental health and stress levels increase, loss of self-control and tolerance increase the chances of use of violence. As such, increased mental health efforts increase self-care for caregivers and teachers thus contributing to lowering rates of violence against children.

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**KEY ASK 5:****Increase nuanced understanding of the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls**

The study's findings highlight the traditional gender roles of men and women in Pakistani society regarding caregiving. The findings show that a significantly higher percentage of women (28%) compared to men respondents (21%) report that having children at home all the time is a source of stress. Moreover, significantly more female than male respondents report to resorting to violent disciplining methods, and think that it is more difficult to discipline their children during the confinement. This highlights the disproportionate responsibility of girls and women in Pakistan for child-rearing and household activities, which can increase their stress and make it harder for caregivers to adopt positive discipline techniques.

It is then vital that the **Government of Pakistan, international organizations, and community-based organizations must establish programmes to raise awareness among female caregivers regarding the harmful effects of violent discipline.** Additionally, programmes to raise awareness among male caregivers regarding the importance of spending more time with their children and supporting their spouse in child nurturing is required as well. It is only with a more nuanced understanding of the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and its specific implications on girls and women that gendered-based violence can effectively be reduced.

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**KEY ASK 6:****Implement higher regulations and monitoring mechanisms in Alternative Care Facilities (ACFs) while increasing investment in safer services**

Qualitative study looking at Alternative Care Facilities (ACFs) show that despite being brought to ACFs as a means to protect these vulnerable children, it is observed that COVID-19 has immensely impacted services providing necessary services such as food, shelter, clothing, and health facilities. With education, provision of health services, vocational training programs, and after-school and recreational activities being areas most severely impacted, children who heavily relied of these resources are suffering.

Although attempts to take precautionary measures related to COVID-19 to avoid virus outbreaks are being made, these centres do not have enough resources to adopt all COVID related SOPs such as adjusting accommodation and reducing the number of children living in one room. Moreover, as all the learning activities at the ACFs are closed and the recreational activities cannot be arranged, this inertia leads to frustration amongst children,

causing many to attempt to escape from the centres exposing them to further dangers.

Moreover, anecdotal evidence from the qualitative study shows that children are generally exposed to physical violence from the caregivers, teachers and peers as facing violent disciplinary methods. Many respondents reported greater cases of abuse from government-run alternative care facilities and at Madrasas whereas private-run centres had relatively better monitoring mechanisms.

As such, the **Government of Pakistan and international donors must implement higher regulations and monitoring mechanisms in these alternative care facilities to ensure no form of abuse is occurring.** Additionally, more investments should be made in order for centres to be able to fulfill safe alternatives to the impacted services while also supporting mental wellbeing of caregivers and the children.

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#### KEY ASK 7:

##### **Undertake further data collection on the impacts of COVID-19 on children in Pakistan**

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues into 2021 and beyond, many communities have begun to adapt to a new normal. However, the negative effects on mental health and family dynamics are likely to continue and become exacerbated due to ongoing stress. While the study conducted by MAGENTA and UNICEF yielded needed insights on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against children, the findings also generated further questions that warrant investigation.

Article 19 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of a Child<sup>2</sup> states, children should be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect, maltreatment, or exploitation while under the care of parents, guardians, of other caretakers. Therefore, **international organizations, donors, and the Government of Pakistan must monitor the child protection situation in Pakistan through increased investment in ongoing data collection, to ensure that children's rights continue to be championed.** Understanding the gaps between COVID-19 measures and under-explored areas such as the mental health implications are vital if adequate steps are to be taken in the lowering of violence against children in the upcoming crucial months.

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2. Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1990, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

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