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Punjab leads the way with Pakistan's First Child Protection Policy

In June 2025, the Punjab Cabinet approved the Child Protection Policy, becoming the first province in Pakistan to do so. This milestone for child rights **will expand access to child protection services, protect rights and improve service delivery** etc. for **56 million children** living in Pakistan's most populous province, following a three-year journey of close engagement, advocacy, and both technical and financial support from **UNICEF** and the **United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)**.

The Child Protection Challenge

Despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments to protect and uphold child rights (as one of the first signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), the legislative landscape in Punjab does not adequately address the needs of children. The 2004 Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act (PDNCA) does not cover child protection issues comprehensively, particularly the response to all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect of children.

As per the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey conducted in 2024,



Violent behaviour against children in Punjab remains alarmingly high at 83 per cent.¹



One in five children's births are unregistered.²



15 percent (or 4.5 million) of girls are married before the age of 18 years and 3% girls (or nearly 1 million) are married before the age of 15.3



Nearly 11% or 6 million children are engaged in child labour and hazardous work.⁴

According to a study by Sustainable Development Organisation (SSDO), over 7,600 cases of violence against children were reported across Pakistan in 2024, including 6,000 cases were recorded in Punjab, the highest across all provinces primarily due to its larger demographic base.

UNICEF and FCDO support six District Child Protection Units (DCPUs) in six districts of Punjab⁵, which addressed over 800 cases of child abuse, exploitation, and neglect through individual case management during 2024-2025. However, many more cases go unreported due to the lack of access to child protection services and legal redress.

¹ Punjab Multiple Cluster Indicators Survey (MICS) report 2024.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Punjab Child Labor Survey 20-2019

⁵ Rajanpur, DG Khan, Muzaffargarh, Totab Take Singh, Hafizabad, Sargodha

What a Child Protection Policy means for children

In the rural outskirts of Rajanpur, Punjab, four-year-old Athena's life changed when she was abducted and assaulted by a visiting worker. Her disappearance triggered a frantic community search, and by dusk, she was found in the ruins of an abandoned mud house. The trauma left Athena unable to speak, prone to sudden collapses, and haunted by nightmares. Her parents, Ahmed and Sabrina, were devastated and overwhelmed, with limited access to legal or psychological support.

“ Today, Athena is laughing again. She is playing again. She is alive again. shares Ahmed, Athena's father. ”

Athena's recovery is ongoing, but her progress is a testament to the support provided by the UNICEF-supported District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) in Rajanpur. With FCDO's financial support, UNICEF established three DCPUs in South Punjab, impacted by the 2022 floods, that are regularly emergency-prone districts. This approach allows strengthening services, sustainability and resilience in and beyond emergencies. These units have significantly improved how child protection cases are managed and have made it easier to connect vulnerable children with essential services.

A DCPU can monitor vulnerable areas, educate communities and provide swift help to safeguard children's right to protection including prevention, response and recovery. Without these essential child protection services more children remain at risk, and the pain and wounds may not heal. This young girl's painful story illustrates the urgent need for a robust Child Protection Policy and its implementation with financing to reduce risks to children while ensuring quality service delivery to assist children on their pathway to recovery.

Advocacy Strategy

UNICEF engaged in a multi-pronged strategy that included:

01 Stakeholder engagement



Through close engagement, the **Child Protection Welfare Bureau (CPWB)** formally requested UNICEF to develop a child protection policy for the province in 2022, to address the urgent need to strengthen and uphold children's rights and protect them from violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect, and harmful practices.



UNICEF with support from **FCDO**, engaged in sustained advocacy with the **Government of Punjab** to bring child protection legislative reforms through the formulation of a child protection bill as well as the development of a Child Protection Policy that provides for the comprehensive protection of children in Punjab, scaling-up prevention and response services.



UNICEF, in partnership with Oxford Policy Management (OPM), developed the Child Protection Policy through an inclusive, multi-sectoral approach. The process involved extensive consultations with key stakeholders including social sector departments, parliamentarians, provincial authorities, academia, and civil society organizations to ensure broad input and ownership. The policy was drafted, thoroughly vetted by all relevant social sector departments and the Law and Parliamentary Affairs department, and finalized through a collaborative and consultative process.



A girl plays Ludo as part of the recreational activities and psychosocial support she receives in the District Child Protection Unit, Punjab.

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Kiran Shahzadi (10) enjoys a joyful moment on the swing with her friend during breaktime at the Government Girls Community Model Primary School in Sardarwala, Lodhran.
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02 Evidence generation



UNICEF supported surveys⁶ that highlighted child rights violations and the urgent need to invest in and protect children. The MICS 2024 report revealed birth registration increased from 75 per cent to 80 per cent between 2018 and 2024 whereas violent discipline remains persistently high, increasing slightly from 81 per cent to 83 per cent during the same time period.



Child marriage mostly impacting girls declined from 19 per cent (2018) to 15 per cent (2024), showing positive progress. Child labour dropped from 13 per cent (2018) to 9 per cent (2024), reflecting better policies and economic improvements. Multiyear and large-scale programmes such as the AAWAAZ I and II Programmes funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) during this same period contributed towards the progress in the Province.



Similarly, the Punjab Child Labor Survey 2019-2020, supported by FCDO provided comprehensive statistics on economic exploitation of children, including hazardous work. The Punjab Child Labour Survey (PCLS) 2019-20 shows prevalence of child labour among 5-14-year-olds is 13.4 per cent, while the prevalence of child labour and hazardous work among 5-17-year-olds is 17 per cent and that of adolescent hazardous labour among 15-17-year-olds is 31 per cent.



In comparison, other provinces in Pakistan exhibit varying rates of child labour: in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 9% of children aged 5-17 are involved in child labour; in Balochistan, the rate is 3.7%; in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), 2.4% of children are engaged in child labour; in Sindh, 10.3% of children aged 5-17 are reported to be working; and in Gilgit-Baltistan, the prevalence stands at 13.1%.



Regionally, South Asia has very high child labour rates, with UNICEF and ILO estimates indicating that over 23 million children aged 5-17 are engaged in child labour. This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions and policies to protect children and reduce hazardous work in the region.

⁶ Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey 2024, Punjab Child Labour Survey 2020

A Milestone for Child Rights in Punjab



The Child Protection Policy was approved by the Punjab Cabinet on 3 June 2025. Over 56 million children in Punjab are covered by the child protection provisions in this landmark policy.



The Government of Punjab has committed to **protecting children from all forms of abuse, violence, neglect, exploitation, and harmful practices**. This includes securing a common understanding among stakeholders, building **legal and procedural foundations, and mandating joint actions by duty bearers** such as families, schools, communities, line departments with a child protection mandate, law enforcement agencies, and local government at district levels.



Key departments such as **Social Welfare, Health, Education, and Police** are involved in the implementation of the policy, ensuring a **multi-sectoral approach** to child protection.



The policy creates provisions for **allocations of public resources** for children's protection. Currently the Government is providing 2.5 million PKR, approximately 8,835 USD per month to 6 DCPUs for case management services.



Furthermore, for the 2025 fiscal year, the Government of Punjab allocated 108 million PKR or 3.82 million USD to Child Protection Welfare Bureau, for the construction of Child Protection Units in four additional districts. These DCPUs are an entry point for the implementation of the Child Protection Policy to cover service delivery gaps once constructed and fully functional. Out of 41 districts in Punjab, only 16 have established District Child Protection Units (DCPUs) under the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau to provide protection services to vulnerable children. The remaining 25 districts lack CPWB/DCPU offices and therefore have no formal child protection services currently.



After the Child Protection Policy was approved, the CPWB endorsed the case management response package developed by UNICEF and called for its implementation by the social service workforce managing child protection cases. In addition, CPWB has also notified a road map to ensure provision of alternative care arrangements in accordance with global guidelines.



The Punjab Child Protection Policy makes a major shift towards making child protection a core government priority. It replaces fragmented, issue-specific responses with a unified framework that promotes collaboration across departments and ensures integrated prevention, protection, and response services at all levels. This policy brings cultural and institutional change by providing a clear structure for government, civil society, and communities to work together to keep every child safe from violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and harmful practices.

Sarah Ahmed, Chairperson, Child Protection Welfare Board, Punjab.



The District Child Protection Unit in Rajanpur Punjab, a safe space where children can heal and thrive.

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OPEN
YOUR
MIND



Lesson Learned



Political will and persistent engagement were critical.



UNICEF's convening power as a longstanding champion of child rights in Pakistan, strong technical expertise and impactful advocacy supported the achievement of a stronger policy framework in Punjab.



The approval of the policy represents a crucial milestone but true progress depends on its effective implementation. Achieving meaningful advances in child protection across Punjab requires not only public investment and strong commitment but establishing and scaling up service delivery through Child Protection Units in all 41 districts.



Child protection must be embedded into public budgets, and oversight and coordination systems must be strengthened among all stakeholders. Only with robust case management, dedicated resources, and policy adherence can we turn this policy from a promise into practice.



Build on opportunities to develop integrated child protection systems and services beyond infrastructure. Public allocations need to reinforce investments in quality and timely child protection service delivery mechanisms across Punjab ensuring better protection of children everywhere.

Way forward

UNICEF and FCDO are now focused on:



Advocating for public funds allocation in annual budgets for policy implementation.



Supporting implementation and monitoring across all districts.



Building awareness of child protection services, roles and responsibilities at the community level so children and families can benefit.



Replicating this model in other provinces for the approval of their respective child protection policies.

Athena plays with toys as part of the mental health and psychosocial support she receives in the District Child Protection Unit, Rajanpur, Punjab.

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The Power of Partnerships

This success was made possible with the steadfast commitment of the Government of Punjab, particularly, the Child Protection Welfare Bureau (CPWB) Home Department, the provincial Social Sector Departments., the Oxford Policy Management (OPM), sustained advocacy by UNICEF, and the unwavering support of the UK Government to champion child rights in Pakistan.

Anoud Fatima (8), having a fun game of cricket in the Government Model Primary School playground in Goth Lashkar, Bhawalpur.

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