

# **Endemic of Violence and Child Labor during COVID-19 - A Narrative Case Study on the Effective Well-being Strategies for Building Resilience among Public School Going Learners in Karachi**

**Salima Moosa Sadruddin Sewani**

**Head Mistress, Govt Boys Primary School, Liaquatabad, and Associate Volunteer Director, GFTE**  
[salima\\_moosa\\_sewani@yahoo.com](mailto:salima_moosa_sewani@yahoo.com)

## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the tribulations faced by the public school-going learners in Karachi during COVID-19. It also sheds light on the innovative pilot strategies that we used to support their education during the closure of the school. Through the reflective narrative case study approach, fellow teachers first gathered a few stories from learners and parents, living in their neighborhoods. They reported cases of child labor, slavery, and early marriages. We then discussed, planned, and piloted strategies to teach and support learners of grades 5 to 8 during COVID-19. We prepared educational packs that included educational games, assignments, and an easy-to-use guidebook. We also offered phone-based academic counseling to learners. Strategies like, taking parents and community leaders into confidence, and offering free vocational education, medical checkups, and medicines to parents and learners worked successfully. Around 17 girl children and 32 male children, who were engaged in child labor during COVID-19 returned to their routine education. Throughout the process, the role of community leaders was pertinent. Our contextual education model for marginalized children and parents can be used by other educational institutions during an uncertain time.

Keywords: child labor, violence, COVID-19, education, marginalized, well-being, public school learners, innovative pilot strategy, resilience

## **Introduction**

Violence and child labor are the most brutal forms of children's rights violations that were documented during COVID-19 (Corsi, 2021; UNICEF, 2021a; United Nations, 2020; United Nations, 2021). Globally, around 160 million children (as of 2020) are working in hazardous working conditions. It is predicted that the number could rise to 168.9 million by the end of 2022 due to COVID-19. South Asia has seen steady progress in child labor cases, with a marked increase of females in forced labor activities (International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, 2021; Idris, 2020).

Pakistan is an advocate of child rights. Article 11.3 of the Constitution of Pakistan states, "No child below the age of fourteen years shall be engaged in any factory or mine or any other hazardous employment". Child Employment Act of 1991 also protects children from child labor<sup>1</sup>. Pakistan is also a signatory to global conventions like the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Despite this, cases of child labor are mounting with time. The most documented reasons for child labor include economic inequality and low literacy rate (SPARC, 2019; United Nations Children's Fund and Wafaqi Mohtasib (Ombudsman's) Secretariat, 2015; Zafar et al., 2016; Zaidi et al., 2013).

Around 3.3 million children are deprived of their childhood in Pakistan due to child labor (UNICEF, 2021b). Children work in a hazardous environment like working in a factory, forced domestic work, and child pornography. These illicit activities have resulted in brutal consequences. It has also affected their mental health and education. Thus, child labor is a never-ending scourge, which is magnifying with time due to weak interventions.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1335242011\\_887.pdf](https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1335242011_887.pdf)

COVID-19 has severely affected the routine educational practices of children belonging to vulnerable groups and marginalized communities. It has also forced many children to participate in child labor activities. After the school closure, some parents, living in extreme poverty, opted to send their children to work, to make both ends meet. Kaur and Byard (2021) highlighted unemployment, lack of parental education, families engaged in labor-intensive occupations, and the lowest household income as reasons behind the ruthless parental decision. The study conducted by Ahad et al. (2021) reported a high spike in maltreatment like violent parental behavior, and domestic violence during COVID-19. It is predicted that these children will not return to their academic life. One of the reports added, “School closures during lockdowns add to the risks, especially for children in vulnerable situations. When children leave school and enter paid employment, it can be very difficult for them to resume their education” (International Labour Organization & United Nations Children’s Fund, 2021).

It is pertinent to highlight that many Pakistani children belonging to marginalized communities, routinely work parallel with acquiring education, to support their family members. But due to added financial burden during COVID-19 and the closure of schools, a good number of children were compelled to work full-time without their consent. These children were also exposed to harmful social practices. UNICEF and UNESCO (2021) documented, “Harmful social norms became more prevalent across the region as household financial insecurity increased cases of child labour and early marriage” (p.20). It is unlikely that children working full-time will return to routine educational life. Agha et al. (2020) expressed, “There is a grave concern that many children may not return to schools as economic hardship may have caused many students to be involved in labor. Moreover, the increased strain on resources may also widen gender inequalities in education as households may favor boys’ education over girls” (p.28).

Narratives of children on the impact of child labor on their education and mental well-being during COVID-19 are not chronicled in Pakistan.

I have been actively engaged in reflective teaching praxis for the past twenty years. My prime focus has always been to inculcate positive values among children and to support their mental well-being. For the past five years, as the Principal of one of the public sector schools, I have been striving to improve their lives through innovative and integrative approaches. During COVID-19, when the schools were closed, I was unable to reach parents and children for the first three months. My qualms grew with time. I was worried about their future. I decided to connect with students, and visited neighborhoods with other teachers. This study was conducted to gather narratives through the lens of affected learners, understand their needs, pilot innovative strategies to teach and support the education of learners, and find their impact on their well-being.

## **Research Questions**

What are the challenges faced by the public school-going learners in Karachi during COVID-19?

How innovative pilot strategies support education of public school-going learners during the closure of the school?

## **Research Design**

I have taken a reflective narrative case study approach. It helps collect current realities from individuals about life events (Baron & McNeal, 2019; Sunday et al., 2020). 132 students from grades 5 to 8, studying at one of the public sector schools in Karachi, Pakistan, are taken as samples, selected through convenience sampling. Data is gathered through interviews with parents and children. For ethical consideration, I adapted the British Educational Research Association (BERA) framework for ethical guidelines.

## **Data Analysis**

### **My Reflective Narrative**

I have been serving as a Principal and a senior teacher at one of the oldest public schools in Karachi, Pakistan for the last five years. Most of the students are from marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Most parents are employed in low-wage jobs, for example, sweeper, cobbler, car mechanic, plumber, maid, or vegetable seller. Some

are unemployed and actively involved in drug addiction. I also learned that most of the children are engaged in part-time child labor activities like working as a cobbler, selling goods in the street, and being a maid. It was challenging for me to motivate parents to curb child labor practice, but it was possible to motivate parents to send their children to school. Back in 2016, around 1000 students were enrolled in my school from grades 1 to 10, but only about 100 children used to attend school each day. However, I encouraged a good number of parents to send their children to school regularly for some time. I also financially supported some parents in many ways. Parents' teacher meetings and get-together events helped me to understand their mindset, and stay in touch with them. All these helped increase the attendance ratio from 100 to 500. But increasing attendance was not adequate. To inculcate human rights values among learners, I initiated a children rights club at my school. I also organized fundraising campaigns with colleagues and established an institutional library.

### **Scenario during COVID-19**

When COVID-19 hit Pakistan, it badly affected the education system. Due to the closure of schools, many private schools shifted to online education, but the public school learners suffered the most, as the government failed to offer a feasible solution to support the education of marginalized children, who lack access to digital devices and the internet connections. Reports underlined technological barriers, and lack of teachers' preparedness as factors for learning gaps during school closures (Geven & Hasan, 2021; UNICEF, 2021c). The government introduced Tele-School programs to make the most out of television, but its impact is not chronicled.

For more than three months, my school learners were out of my contact. The worrisome situation motivated me to learn about their well-being. I wanted to understand learners' ordeals through their lens and take steps to support their education in the best possible ways within the availability of limited resources.

### **First Phase**

During the first phase, seven teachers from my school decided to gather narratives from the learners, who were enrolled in our school and living in their neighborhood. I also joined them. The torments that were gathered during visits were jaw-dropper. We gathered seventeen heart-wrenching stories that echoed learners' miseries. Reflecting on children's stories, they had a desire to learn and had a wish to pursue their dreams. Most of them expressed to resume their education, but only had textbooks, and no education support and guidance during the lockdown. Some of them also expressed their fears and hopelessness.

### **Miseries and Fear due to Child Labour**

A few parents robbed childhood by engaging children in child labor activities. One of the students was found in miserable condition. He informed, how he was forced to work from early morning till night as a slave at one of the brick kiln factories. His hands were covered with cuts and scars. He vent out his fear of losing his dream to become a doctor. He sighed and begged,

“I don't want to work in the factory... My wish is to become a doctor... The seniors at the factory treated me very badly. I love my parents, but my future is unpredictable. I am unsure If I can continue my education again... help me! ... I promise I will study with dedication...”

Few of the girl students reported that they were forced to work as a maid. They also reported incidents of physical and verbal abuse. Contrary, a few were compelled to work and support their family members. One of the female students narrated,

“I am working as a maid with my mother... She has not forced me to work. I like working because I have a responsibility to feed my ill father and my younger brother... Due to school closure, I was free at home so I thought why not help my mother”

We could not reach all the learners due to the unavailability of home addresses and lockdown situation, but no cases of child pornography, forced begging, and sex trafficking was reported. However, one of the learners hinted,

“I have seen ABC begging people on the streets.”

Children were at risk of neglect and child abuse during the Covid pandemic as it has brought significant changes in parental behavior due to stress (Abramson, 2021). We also met parents during home visits. Many female parents were enthusiastic to send their children to school after COVID-19 but were worried about their financial stability. Most of them lost their jobs and were living from hand to mouth. The financial scheme introduced by the government was not adequate. We also learned from the neighbors at one of the locations that two girls were the victims of child marriage, while some other children were also trapped in domestic violence. One of the parents revealed,

“My daughter was at home for months. When the schools were opened, I witnessed hope in her eyes... Now she sells toys with her father, who wants her to join the toy business... I can see misery in her eyes but I am helpless”.

### **Second Phase- Intervention**

I arranged a meeting with fellow teachers and discussed how best we can support the education of these children to avoid further academic loss. I decided to stop this peril. I took ownership to educate children. I first held several group meetings with parents and community leaders, and later arranged two sessions for them about the significance of education and well-being. The community leaders played a significant role in motivating most of the parents to allow their children to continue their education from home.

### **An Innovative Strategy**

With the support of teaching colleagues, I presented incentives to parents, for example, teaching them vocational education like sewing, baking, basic mobile phone operation, and English communication (once a week); arranged free medical check-ups and basic health and hygiene kits; and offered free counseling sessions. These activities propelled consistent interaction with parents that helped us to stay in the loop with children's activities and academic participation. Most of the parents who initially resisted their children to continue education from home agreed to cooperate. To ease some financial burden, I connected a few poor parents with social institutions that provided them free ration bags every month. I also offered jobs to three unemployed parents. They were allowed to put up a food stall in school during break times after the schools reopened. I also hired one of the parents as a sweeper.

After taking parents into confidence, I offered free training to my fellow teachers for a week. We then prepared emergency educational packs that included assignments, notes, and an easy-to-use guidebook. I specially designed games to empower children about human rights values. My friends and fellows initiated crowd-funding to print these packages for children. We also offered low-cost technology alternatives like free academic help to children via local mobile phone calls. Every week, when teachers visited different areas to conduct a vocational training session, the learners were asked to submit their educational packs to the teachers and to take the second package. For four months, we continuously conducted this pilot study. Throughout the journey, we also faced challenges, like a few parents refusing to continue education. Some of the strategies like educating parents parallel with children worked, while others did not. It made me learn many things from trials and errors. Around 17 girl children and 32 male children, who were engaged in child labor during COVID-19 returned to their routine education during the closure of the school, and that we count as a triumph.

### **Reality Check**

The schools reopened on August 30, 2021. Most of the students have returned to educational institutions while some have not. Those who are back are filled with joy and are working with more zeal to embark upon their future. These days, we are setting up free computer classes for parents and teachers with the support of philanthropists. We consider parents as our allies and still offer them support in the best possible way. Today, my school is a role model for other institutions in the community with the highest enrolment ratio. We are still striving to motivate those parents, whose children did not return, and may need our help.

## Recommendations

We recommend the government of Pakistan to prepare an educational plan for public school-going learners to deal with uncertain times. We also propose other educational institutions to take ownership and support their children in the best possible ways. The potential of using low-cost technology like mobile phones, radio, and TV, for meeting educational needs during uncertain times must be explored. For parents, a literacy program must be initiated. For mental well-being, social counseling unit must be set up by all educational institutions.

## Conclusion

The endemic of violence and child labor during COVID-19 has badly affected the well-being of learners. With proper planning and ownership, institutions can propose sustainable plans to avoid the academic loss of marginalized learners. Our contextual education model for marginalized children and parents can be used by other educational institutions during an uncertain time.

## References

- Abramson, A. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on parental burnout. *American Psychological Association*, 52(7), 36. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/10/cover-parental-burnout>
- Ahad, M. A., Parry, Y. K., & Willis, E. (2020). Spillover trends of child labour during the Coronavirus crisis-An unnoticed wake-up call. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 8, 488. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2020.00488
- Agha, R., Qaisrani, A., Mughal, M., & Asif, S. (2020). *COVID-19 and disaster vulnerability in Pakistan: A human rights based analysis*. UNDP & Ministry of Human Rights, Government of Pakistan. <http://www.mohr.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/COVID-19%20and%20Human%20Rights%20Taskforce%20Report%20-%20FINAL%20edit.pdf>
- Baron, A., & McNeal, K. (2019). *Case study methodology in higher education*. IGI Global. 10.4018/978-1-5225-9429-1
- Corsi, M. (2021, November 3). *The failure to tackle violence against children during COVID-19 and the recovery*. <https://www.unicef.org/eap/stories/failure-tackle-violence-against-children-during-covid-19-and-recovery>
- Geven, K., Hasan, A. (2020). *Learning losses in Pakistan due to COVID-19 school closures: A technical note on simulation results*. The World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/34659>
- Idris, I. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 on child labour in South Asia. Knowledge, evidence and learning for development*. <https://gsdrc.org/publications/impact-of-covid-19-on-child-labour-in-south-asia/>
- International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund. (2021). *Child labour- Global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward*. [https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS\\_800278/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_800278/lang--en/index.htm)
- Kaur, N. & Byard, R. W. (2021). Prevalence and Potential consequences of child labour in India and the possible impact of COVID-19- a contemporary overview. *Med Sci Law*, 61(3), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0025802421993364>
- SPARC. (2019). *Child labour*. <https://sparcpk.org/images/SOPC2020/CL.pdf>
- Sunday, A., Ramugondo, E., & Kathard, H. (2020). Case Study and Narrative Inquiry as Merged Methodologies: A Critical Narrative Perspective. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1609406920937880>
- UNICEF. (2021). *Child Protection*. <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/child-protection-0>
- United Nations. (2020). *Violence against children and adolescents in the time of COVID-19*. [https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/publication/files/46486/S2000610\\_en.pdf](https://www.cepal.org/sites/default/files/publication/files/46486/S2000610_en.pdf)

UNICEF. (2021a). *Child protection risks during COVID-19*.

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/child\\_protection\\_risks\\_during\\_covid-19.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/child_protection_risks_during_covid-19.pdf)

United Nations. (2021b). *Impact of coronavirus disease on different manifestations of sale and sexual exploitation of children*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/impact-coronavirus-disease-different-manifestations-sale-and-sexual-exploitation>

UNICEF. (2021c). *Brief on learning continuity amidst COVID-19 school closures in Pakistan*.

<https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/3761/file/Pakistan%20Brief%20on%20learning%20continuity%20amidst%20COVID19.pdf>

United Nations Children's Fund and Wafaqi Mohtasib (Ombudsman's) Secretariat (2015). *The state of children in Pakistan*. <https://mohtasib.gov.pk/SiteImage/Downloads/WMS%20Committee%20report/SOCP.pdf>

UNICEF & UNESCO. (2021). *Situation analysis on the effects of and responses to COVID-19 on the education sector in Asia- Pakistan case study*. United Nations Children's Fund and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Zafar, Z., Sarwar, I., & Haider, S.I. (2016). Socio-economic and political causes of child labor: The case of Pakistan, *Global Political Review*, 1(1), 32-43.

<https://www.gprjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2LALJouq9hkR/PccnlG7vwK.pdf>

Zaidi, N., Javed, N., & Khan, M.S. (2013). Child labour in Pakistan- A tip of an iceberg. *J Postgrad Med Inst*, 27(3), 285-289. <http://www.shram.org/uploadFiles/20180330103457.pdf>