

Protection Of Children At Risk (POCAR)

Child abuse is a global problem and pervades all cultures and socio-economic strata. The effects can be profound and life altering for victims. There is substantial literature from high income countries about signs of abuse, but a dearth of data from low and middle income countries like Pakistan.

With 39% of Pakistan's population under 18, the latest data shows Pakistan having over 80.4 million children in the country. As per the latest poverty report, 24% of Pakistan's population lives below the national poverty line; which includes 31% in rural areas and 13% in urban areas. An estimated 22.6 million children between the age of 5 and 16 are out-of-school at the primary, middle, and secondary level i.e. 44% of the country's children. On average 8 children are abused on daily basis as per media report in Pakistan, however actual number is much higher than reported. Only 34% children at birth are registered nationally. It was estimated that almost a quarter of women aged 20-49 were married before the age of 15, and 31% before eighteen years of age.

Extreme poverty situation effects the wellbeing of children and their families which is also one of the major factor leading to high ratio of street children/child labor. Pakistan has approximately 3.3 million street children, out of which, 94 % are boys and the rest 6 % are girls. It is a bitter truth that street children/child labor are contributing significant share in household income at the cost of their future, where they are deprived of quality education, improved health and above all their innocence.

In this connection, Islamic Relief Pakistan conceptualized Protection of Children at Risk (POCAR) project to address child protection issues. A comprehensive approach towards protection of children involved in labour was required creating skills set within their families through which they can manage their basic family needs. Furthermore, sensitization among the community and especially their employers put a positive impact on these children. Besides these interventions, this initiative urged to build a social safety net around these children and their families by linking them to child protection service providers. Following conceptual model is showing the approach being used to cater the issue of child labour.

IRP staff initiated community engagements with teachers, faith leaders, activists, ultra-poor families, councilors (elected local representatives), employers and key stakeholders. Faith leaders played a vital role in not only creating awareness among the society but also persuading key influential persons to step forward and join hands with Islamic Relief in strengthening protection mechanism for the street children. With the support of these active faith leaders Child Care Groups (CCGs) were formed, which includes teachers, faith leaders, employers, lawyers, social activists and families.

Focusing on educational aspect of street children, street children/child labor were successfully enrolled in Non-Formal Basic Education Schools (NFBEs), managed by Government's ministry of Literacy and Non Formal Education.

**Conceptual Model
Protection Of Children At Risk (POCAR)**



These NFBE schools were made more attractive and acceptable for street children by refurbishing with LEDs, Schools Bags, Books, stationary, fans, carpets, teachers' stipends, sanitary kits, recreational materials, and schools repairs. IRP introduced Speed Literacy Programme (SLP) for NFBE schools teachers and children to improve the quality of education, reduction of corporal punishments, improve mannerism of a child and teachers on job trainings.

Vocational skills centers were also established in NFBE schools and communities as a part of alternative livelihood strategy for ultra-poor families with an objective to reduce families' dependency on child income and enhance families' priorities to focus more on education instead of labor work. Each center was provided with provisions of training material such as industrial stitching machines, raw material, furniture, beautician training material, Electrician tools, trainers & caretaker etc. women and youth were graduated on industrial stitching, beautician and electrician courses and were provided grant kits to kick start their own business or job placement. Numeracy and financial literacy skills adds flavor in vocational skills trainings to strengthen their arithmetic's for Banking, budgeting and counting skills. Resultantly.

Psychosocial support plays vital role in developing confidence level of children, teachers, families and CCG to actively participate in counselling sessions, developing knowledge on nutrition's and recreational activities. Children and their families along with CCGs and Key stakeholder were capacitated on core life skills, health & hygiene, physical and mental health issues with special reference to child abuse, depression, hyper tension and aggressive behavior etc.

To build partnerships and bridge the gap between community and service providers, Child Protection and Welfare Bureau (CP&WB) of Punjab, Pakistan joined hands with Islamic Relief Pakistan. Under Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) both partners will explore platforms to address strategic protection issues at provincial level. CCGs members were linked with CP&WB to connect communities with local child protection units.

POCAR has seamlessly integrated and restored street children confidence in society for improved wellbeing through food security, education, health & Hygiene and psychosocial support in well-coordinated efforts with government line departments for sustainable child protection services at their door steps.

As a result of these initiatives, CP&WB and Islamic Relief is jointly working on formulation of first Child Protection Policy in Pakistan. Which will be finalized after thorough consultations with not only experts from relevant departments, academia, or civil society activists but also involving parents, children and youth at every stage. Although a lot of efforts are being put in but still there is a long way to go where every step taken in right direction is marked.