



**Joint Learning Initiative**  
**on Faith & Local Communities**  
Strengthening Evidence-Based Faith Engagement



# The impact of the curriculum and interaction with diverse groups of people on youth behaviour towards people from religious minority backgrounds in South Punjab, Pakistan



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# The impact of the curriculum and interaction with diverse groups of people on youth behaviour towards people from religious minority backgrounds in South Punjab, Pakistan

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## Summary

Hi Voices reviewed previous research and conducted a new survey both in person and online to analyse youth behaviour towards people of other religions. We surveyed 366 young people from diverse backgrounds using random sampling methods in the South Punjab region, mainly in Multan, Pakistan. The results showed that conversations about the rights of people from religious minorities still face backlash from the young community. Also, the survey shows that society is still polarised, with most young people thinking that

the curriculum still needs a lot of improvement when it comes to advocating for religious equality at all levels of educational institutes. Hi Voices is a minority youth-led initiative working for the health and rights of young minorities in Pakistan.

## Keywords

Youth, Pakistan, South Punjab, Education, Religious equality, Religious minorities

## 1. Introduction

Pakistan is considered one of the most multicultural and polarised societies in the world due to its geopolitical position and participation in proxy wars. It is also a potentially fertile land for violent youth (Zaman and Sabir, 2013). More than 64% of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30, so the country has one of the largest youth populations in the world (Ahmad, 2018). Young people are particularly susceptible to accelerating violence (Zaman and Sabir, 2013). As such, youth issues are rapidly moving into debates in the public sphere, and there is a gradual increase in investment in youth by development donors and the Government (Youth Affairs, Sports, Tourism and Archaeology Department, 2012). Hi Voices surveyed young people to understand their behaviour and interaction with people from diverse religions and how they think the curriculum plays a role in this. This paper includes a review of relevant literature and the results of our survey of South Punjab youth.

## 2. Context

### 2.1 Diversity

The Punjab is home to 56% of the entire population of Pakistan. A demographic picture of the province of the Punjab is incomplete without discussing its multifaceted population. Several castes live in rural areas. The role of *bradris* (or castes) in Punjab politics is crucial to influencing young people's relationships with others because politicians do not only use religious sentiments during their political campaigns but also to introduce discriminatory laws when in power (Khalid, 2014). According to the 2017 census, the population comprises 97.2% Muslims, 2.5% Christians, 0.2% Hindus and 0.1% others (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

The diversity of languages in the province has laid the foundation for linguistic ethnicities. Saraiki is a shining example of this. It is the majority language in South Punjab, while Punjabi is the province's official language.

### 2.2 Deprivation and crime

Compared to the rest of the Punjab, South Punjab faces severe poverty and deprivation (Khalid, 2014). In 2020, the economic situation was coupled with a troubling increase of 54.6% in the total number of reported crimes in South Punjab. The region also accounted for

7.3% of cybercrimes reported in Pakistan. Similarly, crime-related data shows an increase of 22% in the total number of harassment cases in South Punjab and a total of 10 rioting incidents were reported in South Punjab (Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

### 2.3 Education

Previous research data from the United Nations Development Programme Pakistan (2018) shows that 29% of Pakistan's youth are illiterate, while only 6% have more than 12 years of education. Alarming, almost half of the country's young people are not in education, employment or training (Ahmad, 2018). Pakistan has 36 million youth aged 20–24 and 58 million under the age of 15, representing 60% of the youth population (Zaman and Sabir, 2013). The Constitution of Pakistan promises free education to all school-age children. However, the data shows that 9.45 million children do not attend primary school. At the current annual net enrolment rate of 0.92%, full school enrolment will not be achieved until 2076 (Ahmad, 2018). Those who attend school face other issues as most public schools, colleges and universities have no student unions, student clubs and extracurricular activities. Low-cost private institutions experience similar shortages, as do low-income communities where most youth are out of school (Haque, 2014). The Government of the Punjab (2021) has allocated 13,797 million Pakistani rupees for schools and education in South Punjab for 2022–2023.

### 2.4 Youth violence

Nearly 70,000 children are on the streets, and about the same number are off the streets but vulnerable to becoming violent youth in the near future due to the ever-deteriorating socioeconomic and political conditions in Pakistan. Many historical aspects figure on the list of factors that incite violence. For example, the country's independence was based on violence (Zaman and Sabir, 2013), and Pakistan emerged as a state to specifically represent the Muslim population of the former British India (Haque, 2014). In 1947, refugees from the 'Indian part' of the subcontinent experienced great violence. Three wars with India and ongoing proxy wars between the two neighbours contributed to the violence. Proxy groups between the neighbouring countries who exploit youth using various tactics are a constant threat (Zaman and Sabir, 2013). Under the dictatorship of former General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, conditions encouraged the spread of individual exclusivist identities among Pakistan's youth. These are supported by political and religious groups that seek to define themselves in accordance with Islam and in opposition to everything else, including Indigenous culture (Haque, 2014). As the country has one of the highest youth populations in the world, this population is the most affected (Zaman and Sabir, 2013).

Reaching out to the youth population requires an understanding of the issues and challenges they face in South Punjab (Youth Affairs, Sports, Tourism and Archaeology Department, 2012). As one of the strictest family-controlled societies, Pakistan has high levels of various types of violence. Collective or group violence is common due to the aforementioned political, ethnic, religious and sectarian segregation. The main antecedents of youth violence are poverty, illiteracy, inequality and limited opportunities for positive social

interaction, such as education, employment and sports. These factors lead to a culture of violence among youth. This violent culture creates a vicious cycle of problems that directly or indirectly victimises almost everyone in Pakistani society (Zaman and Sabir, 2013). Youth violence profoundly affects not only its victims but also their families, friends and communities. There is a close connection between youth violence and other forms of violence. Violent youth commit a variety of crimes and exhibit other forms of deviant social and psychological behaviour (Search for Common Ground, 2014).

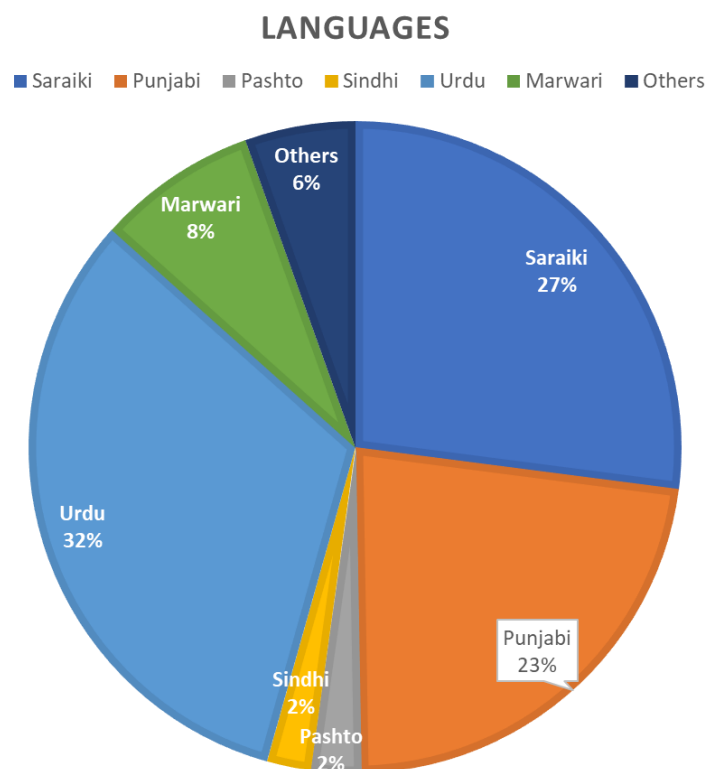
### **3. Survey**

The survey was conducted both in person and online to analyse youth behaviour towards people of other religions. It also included young people's thoughts and expectations of their educational institutes and curriculum in terms of religious equality. We surveyed 366 young people of diverse religious backgrounds using random sampling methods in the South Punjab region, mainly in Multan, Pakistan. A team of 10 volunteers from diverse religious backgrounds contributed to reaching the survey participants across South Punjab. Only young people under the age of 30 years were selected to be part of the survey. The team reached out to young community members in family, neighbourhood and educational institutes and on the streets both in groups and individually. When addressing a group, the team also had a discussion with them after the survey to get their views on its questions and themes. Many online gatherings also helped the team reach the target of 366 survey respondents.

### **4. Findings and discussion**

#### **4.1 General biodata on gender, age, religion, language and ethnicity**

The majority of the respondents (82%) belonged to the Muslim community. The Christian community accounted for 7.4% of respondents, the Hindu community for 9.8%, Sikh 0.5%, atheist and other minorities 0.3%. In terms of gender, 61.2% of respondents were male, 37.4% were female, and 1.4% were of other genders. Most of the participants (86.3%) permanently lived in the Punjab, with 5.2% from Sindh, 2.7% from Baluchistan, 3.3% from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and 2.5% from other regions of Pakistan. Despite being from major Muslim communities, the participants belonged to different language-speaking communities. Most respondents identified as Urdu speakers (32.2%), while 27% spoke Saraiki, the local language of South Punjab. In addition, 22.7% of participants were Punjabi speakers, 7.9% were Marwari speakers – a language common among the Hindu community –, 2.5% were Pashto speakers, 2.2% were Sindhi speakers, and 5.5% spoke other languages. Out of all the young people who participated in the survey, 57.9% were aged 18 to 24 years old, and 24.6% were aged 25 to 29 years old. Most of the respondents were educated to some level, with 46.4% having a higher or university education and 22.1% having a secondary school education.

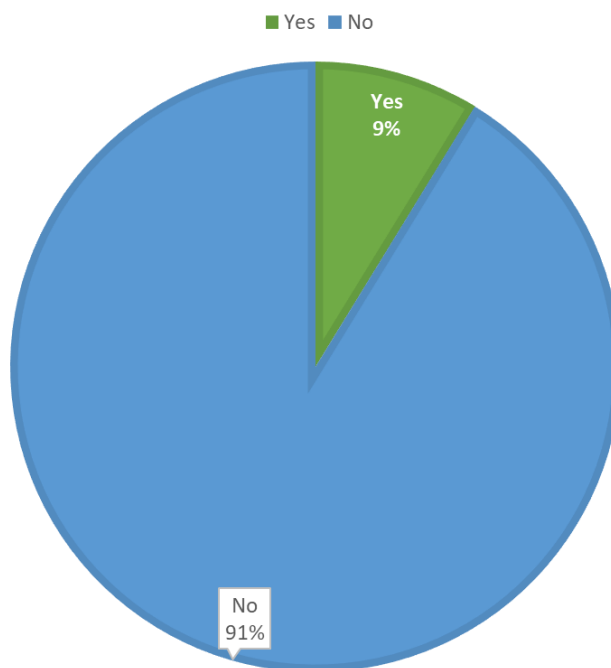


#### 4.2 Everyday interaction with religious minorities

The results show that around 91.3% of young people grow up in families without a single person from another belief or religion. This highlights that young people are growing up in an environment where they do not learn how to interact with people from other religions or beliefs. Only a very small number of people (8.7%) have families with diverse religious beliefs. Survey results show that young people mostly interact with other young people of different identities only in their classrooms. Around 49.5% of people have diverse classrooms of young people from different religious beliefs. It showcases the importance of the education system compared to the almost complete lack of home and family-based interaction with a variety of people. We need to keep in mind that a significant portion of young people are out of classrooms and only interact with family members and neighbours with no opportunity to learn and interact with diverse people. However, knowing that half of educational institutes (around 50.5%) do not even have a single young person with diverse beliefs shows that almost half of the young population of Pakistan is unable to learn and interact with diverse youth even in these institutes. The results showcase that conversations around other religious beliefs and people happen in classes based on the curriculum. For young people who are unable to interact with diverse people in their educational institute, the most common option can be the neighbourhood and friends. However, in the South Punjab community, there are no diverse neighbourhoods. Survey results show 53.6% of people do not have a diverse religious neighbourhood, with only 46.4% of participants living in neighbourhoods with people with different religious beliefs. One positive finding of the survey is that even those not living in diverse neighbourhoods or educational

institutes interact with people from diverse religious beliefs. Of the participants, 60.4% have friends with other religious beliefs, while 39.6% do not have any friends with other religious beliefs. As this is a significant population, there is a need to work on this issue.

### DOES YOUR FAMILY AND RELATIVES HAVE PEOPLE FROM MORE THAN ONE RELIGIOUS BELIEVES?

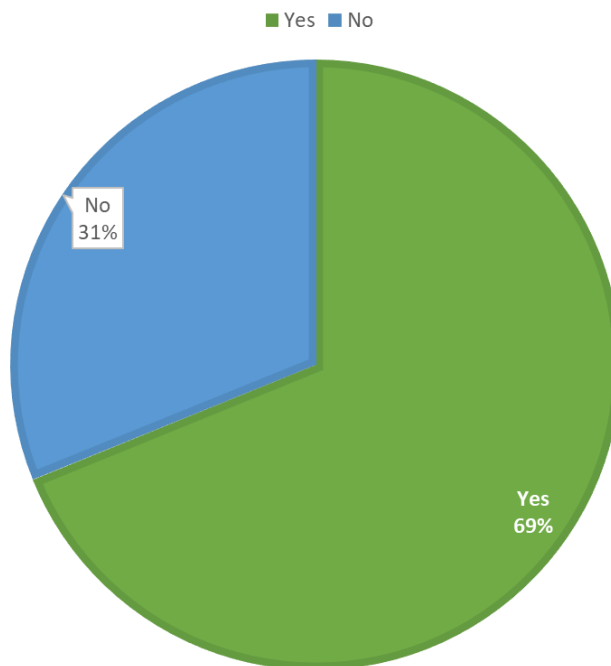


#### 4.3 Educational institutes and curriculum

A significant number of respondents (68.9%) indicated that they believe the curriculum teaches about religious equality while 31.1% disagreed with this statement. Here, we must note that the majority of participants were Muslims from a Muslim-majority country. Further analysis is needed to find a correlation between answers from religious minority and majority participants on their thinking about the curriculum. When asked whether the particular curriculum they are being taught advocates for equal rights for all religions, answers were similar: 74.3% believe it does while 25.7% believe it does not. When asked whether their educational institutes hold discussions on religious beliefs, 66.1% of respondents said they do while 33.9% said there were no such discussions in their institutes. In contrast, 73.8% of respondents do not celebrate or have activities related to diverse religious beliefs in their institutes, and only 26.2% of institutes celebrate activities related to other religious beliefs.



### DOES PAKISTANI EDUCATIONAL CURRICULA GIVES EQUAL STATUS TO ALL RELIGIOUS BELIEVES?

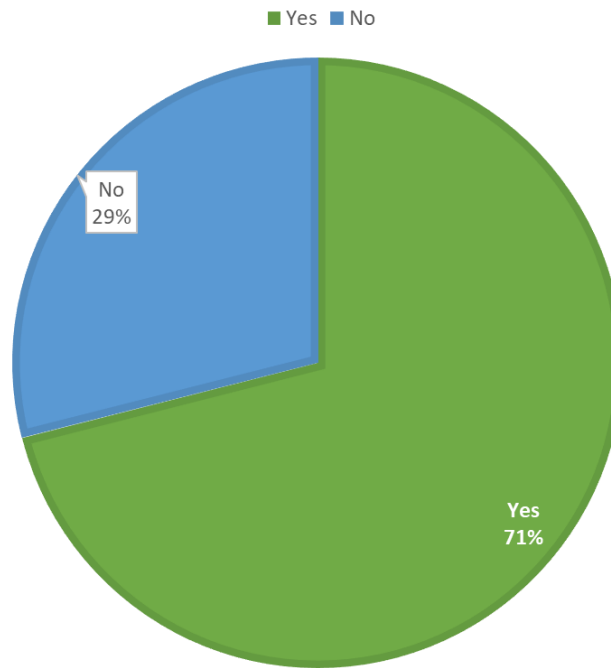


#### 4.4 Young people’s perceptions of people of diverse religious beliefs

The majority (71%) of respondents said they think or raise questions about other religious beliefs in their minds, while the remaining 29% never do. Of the respondents, 64.5% said they do not have negative thoughts about other religious beliefs compared with 35.5% who do. With regards to arguing with others about their religious beliefs, 26.8% of participants had argued with other people, while 73.2% had never argued about their religious beliefs. When asked if they had had any physical confrontations with people of different religious beliefs, 94% said never, while 5.2% had had a confrontation with other people due to their religious beliefs. Three-quarters (75.1%) of the young people surveyed said they had never been stigmatised or discriminated against based on their religious beliefs. However, 24.9% said they had faced some form of religious discrimination or stigmatisation. When asked whether they had been asked to change their religious beliefs, 26.5% of participants said they had, while 73.5% had never been asked. On the other hand, when asked if they had asked someone else to change their religion, 17.8% said they had, versus 82.2% who had never asked someone to change their religion. Of the young people surveyed, 75.1% believed that religion had never influenced their relationship or friendship with anyone. However, 24.9% believed that it had.



### DO YOU EVER HAD THOUGHTS OR QUESTIONS IN YOUR MIND ABOUT OTHER RELIGIOUS BELIEVES?



#### 4.5 Improving the curriculum

Lastly, we asked whether there is still a need to improve the curriculum in terms of religious equality. The results were crystal clear, with 87.2% saying there is a need to work to make the curriculum equally inclusive for all religions. Only 12.8% believe there is no need to improve the curriculum in terms of religious equality.



*Figure 1 A group of young women participating in the survey and discussion*



*Figure 2 Two survey participants filling out the survey*

## 5. Recommendations

In previous studies on youth views, young Pakistani respondents expressed high levels of identification with religious value systems. For example, according to a survey in the *Youth Radicalization in Pakistan* policy brief (Haque, 2014), 88% of educated young people in elite educational institutions said that religion was their primary identity, and 50% saw their national identity as dependent on their Islamic identity. In another national survey from the same brief, 75% identified as Muslim compared to just 14% as Pakistani, suggesting that their religious identity is more important than their nationality. At the extreme, this form of closed, homogenised self-identity can increase the propensity of youth to radicalise (Haque, 2014). Medico-legal studies across Pakistan have highlighted the situation of youth violence in Pakistan. For instance, in one town in the north, 62% of violent acts are committed by young men aged 20 to 39 years old (Zaman and Sabir, 2013). Similarly, in southern Pakistan, reports indicate a higher rate of violence (74%) among men aged 20 to 40 years old (Zaman and Sabir, 2013). Another central town study portrays the situation as even worse, with victims aged 16 to 45 years old accounting for 77% of violence-related cases reported in hospitals. Of the young men involved in these acts of violence, 41% were aged 16 to 20 years old (Zaman and Sabir, 2013).

In light of this increased extremism among youth, a variety of approaches have been used to reduce violent behaviour among young people. The most common interventions aim to change individuals' skills, attitudes and beliefs. These types of interventions are commonly used in schools and are designed to help youth manage anger, resolve conflict and develop appropriate social skills (Search for Common Ground, 2014).

Previous civil society research has proposed recommendations, including strengthening civil society initiatives to reform curricula and engaging executives of major media houses to support programmes that cover interfaith and intersectorian harmony, tolerance and diversity within a religious framework. In addition, similar initiatives should be supported in

social media, the most important source of information for youth. Haque (2014) recommends encouraging the celebration of local cultural diversity and establishing centres to ensure youth participation in cultural activities, social clubs and professional and sporting organisations. Another recommendation proposed involves the formation of youth committees at the community level so young people become part of decision-making processes and mechanisms. This will not only increase their sense of responsibility but also their contribution to the well-being and peace of the community (Search for Common Ground, 2014). Similarly, arts councils supporting literature, art and music should be extended and strengthened. Youth centres for low-income communities and extracurricular activities for public educational institutions should be supported by non-governmental organisations, private institutions and educational leaders, combining cultural activities and professional skills. Civil society and youth-led inter-university initiatives should be promoted through student clubs that use low-cost technology for regular interactive discussions among youth of different provinces, sects, religions and nationalities to encourage greater interprovincial, international and interfaith interaction. Universities and colleges must be engaged to initiate courses on peace and conflict resolution while engaging youth in interactive workshops (Haque, 2014).

Based on the literature review and survey, we propose that the Government should immediately take steps to increase awareness among young people regarding interreligious harmony and inclusion. Laws should be implemented on equal rights, access to discrimination-free curricula and education environments and equal opportunities at school, college and university for all, irrespective of religious beliefs.

There should be regular evaluations of curricula that include people from all religious beliefs to ensure they contain no discriminatory material. Influencers, activists and stakeholders, including educational institutes, should have to promote diversity and information regarding all religious beliefs and people's rights as equal citizens.

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## About the Author

Ali Raza Khan is a young minority rights activist from Multan, Pakistan. He is from the Shia minority community and has been working on peacebuilding and advocating for equal rights since 2015. As the leader of his university's student club, he received a shield of appreciation for organising the International Peace Day poetry competition. He has won second place in an interuniversity peace art competition. Ali Raza engages with multiple local, national and international organisations that focus on peacebuilding, countering violent extremism (CVE), and equal rights for minorities. He is currently leading a minority youth group named "Hi Voices" that aims to raise the voice of young minorities.

## About the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

The JLI is a learning network of researchers and practitioners, building fair and equitable spaces to create and share evidence on religions in development and community work. The JLI aims to strengthen partnerships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally.

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<https://jliflc.com/pve-youth-interfaith-project/>