

Policy Brief

Violent Conflict: Education in Pakistan - Cause and Casualty

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The context

Each day violent conflict is becoming more serious and pervasive in Pakistan. Practically everyone has had some experience of violent conflict either directly or indirectly through experiences of friends and family or exposure to graphic reports in the media. Pakistan is ranked 157th out of 162 countries on the Global Peace Index (Vision of Humanity, 2013). According to the Global Terrorism Index, no other country, aside from Iraq, has been as affected by terrorism as Pakistan (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012). Data suggests that at least 50,000 people have died including 18,000 civilians over the past decade due to terrorism (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2014). There is also a sustained increase in violent crimes such as murder, attempted murder and kidnapping; with kidnappings more than doubling over the last ten years (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Homes and schools are generally thought to be safe places. In Pakistan, however, this is not the case. Women suffer high levels of violence inside their homes. According to the National Institute of Population Studies (2013), one third of married women suffer domestic abuse both physical and psychological: including severe beatings, taunts and even rape. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has expressed concern over the increasing incidence of violence against women that take the form of honour killings, gang rapes, and acid attacks (2013). Girls and young women are often subjected to physical violence for insisting they be sent to school or allowed to continue their schooling. There is evidence to suggest that there is a high incidence of bullying and corporal punishment (Dean, 2008 a & b). Severe cases of corporal punishment as well as incidences of sexual abuse including rape in schools are regularly reported in the press.

As a result of the high incidence of violent conflict in the society, there is increasing tolerance for the use of violence in conflict situations and violent behavior is becoming accepted and normalized. A culture of violence is developing and could become entrenched as violent conflict escalates and the few mechanisms to diffuse conflict peacefully are weakened.

Attacks on Education

Over the last ten years there has been a new development in violent conflict; education has become the target of violent attacks. According to the Save the Children report, "Attacks on Education", there were 10,000 attacks on places of education between 2009 and 2013. Pakistan faced the greatest number of these attacks. The most common form of attack is the blowing up of school buildings, especially girl school buildings by bombs and arson attacks. This is closely followed by targeted attacks on education personnel: teachers, staff and children. While all children are targeted, female children are particularly targeted (See box for attack on Malala Yousafzai and her fellow students).

Malala Yousafzai was a student in a school in Mingora, in the Swat Valley when the Taliban started preventing girls from going to school. In early 2009, at the age of 12, Malala wrote a blog detailing her life under Taliban rule, their attempts to take control of the valley, and her views on promoting education for girls.



On October 9, 2012 Malala was shot, along with two of her friends, Kainat Riaz and Shazia Ramzan, in an attempt to kill them while they were returning home from school in their school van. Malala was the target of the attack because of her advocacy for girl's education.

Malala has since made a remarkable recovery and become a global advocate for education. She uses every opportunity to promote the need for education, especially the education of girls so that every girl in Pakistan as well as in other conflict-affected countries can enjoy her right to education.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) is a citizen-led, household based survey seeking to fill the gap in educational data by providing a reliable set of data at national level. Every year some new variables are added to the survey to determine the impact of external factors on education. Alongside the traditional variables gauging the access and learning levels of children, ASER 2013 measured the incidence of conflict upon the current law and order situation as it is one of the determinants of varied learning levels across regions. Some of the data from the study is referred to below.

Education: The Cause

There are several causes for the increase in violent conflict in Pakistan. Pakistan is a frontline state in the war on terror. It has faced the problem of armed conflict along its long North Western border with Afghanistan since 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. And it continues to do so as part of the international coalition fighting the war on terror. The support of the Pakistani state for the war on terror has resulted in the Taliban retaliating by carrying out armed attacks on the institutions of the state. The Taliban also seek to recreate Pakistan as an Islamic state with sharia not the constitution as the highest law of the land. In their ideology, a women's place is in their homes and the only education girls should receive is Islamic education.

Over the last fifteen years there has been a growing awareness of the ways in which education has been used to create the grounds for, encourage, and exacerbate conflict. "Unequal access to education is often one of the most powerful ways in which dominant groups maintain unequal access to power and wealth between groups within conflict-affected societies and which are often reproduced from one generation to the next" (EFA editor, 2012). In Pakistan, for example, over 60% of poor rural girls aged 7-16 are not attending school compared with fewer than 5% urban males (Brown).

Conflict is also encouraged and further exacerbated by exclusionary policies and/or practices related to the system of education. In Pakistan, the systems of education (IB, Cambridge, Matriculation, Madrassa), the kinds of schools (government, private for-profit and not-for-profit, community-run), the language of instruction (English, Urdu) and identity issues (ethnicity, religion, sect) exclude far too many children from receiving equal access to quality education. This restricts opportunities for the poor, leading to poverty (the government estimates that 50% of the people live below the poverty line), unemployment and a sense of hopelessness. Armed conflict is often started or fueled by grievances and injustice, poverty and unemployment and the resultant sense of hopelessness acts as a recruiting agent for armed groups.

The content of the curriculum, textbooks and teaching practices in schools is also known to fuel violence. There have been numerous studies on how hate is promoted and how young people are incited to violence in the Pakistani curriculum and textbooks of social studies/Pakistan studies, English, Urdu, and Islamiyat. These studies have shown that since 1979 textbooks include facts that are carefully selected and woven into narratives that depict the struggle for, creation and existence of Pakistan as an Islamic state rather than a Muslim majority country and Pakistani citizens as Muslims. They construct a singular national identity in a manner that excludes non-Muslims and equate patriotism with Islamic zeal. In doing so they ignore the religious diversity of Pakistan, "encourage prejudice, bigotry and discrimination towards fellow citizens", and render suspect the patriotism and faith of opposing voices (Nayyar and Salim, 2004).

Gender apartheid is also promoted by dividing the world into the public and private sphere. The public sphere, the sphere of political, economic and social activity is the domain of men. The private sphere of the home is the domain of women whose task it is to cook, clean and care for the children (Dean, 2007). The textbooks thus foster gender stereotypes, entrench biases against women, denigrate and relegate them to secondary status. In essence they enhance the status of men and perpetuate patriarchy.

There are also numerous critiques of teaching and learning in Pakistani schools for promoting rote memorization of content leading to the production of parrots rather than thinking beings (Hoodbhoy, 1998). Teachers are required to teach the government prescribed textbooks and examinations are based on them. The examinations comprise of factual questions that require students to restate the facts given in the textbooks, thus ensuring students learn the given text with its factual distortions, narrow interpretations, encouragement of hostility, prejudice, bigotry and discrimination towards fellow citizens, especially women and religious minorities.

Education: The Casualty

Education has not only been the cause but also the casualty of violent conflict. The most serious casualty of violent conflict on education is the loss of life of children, teachers and staff.

Another casualty is the destruction of schools. The regular destruction of schools in areas of violent conflict deprives whole cohorts of children and education. It is estimated that roughly 50 million primary and lower-secondary school age children are out of school in countries affected by violent conflict. Of these, 28.5 million are children of primary school-age and more than half of them are girls. The proportion of out-of-school children in conflict-affected countries has increased from 42% of the global total in 2008 to 50% in 2011 (Save the Children, 2013). In the Swat Valley of Pakistan, 356 schools were damaged or destroyed between 2007 and July 2009 (Education Policy and Data Center, 2010). According to the Global Monitoring Report 2011, Pakistan has over 5 million out-of-school children, the second highest number of out-of-school children in the world and the second highest number of girls out of school.

Sometimes schools have to close due to violent conflict. Because of the fear for the safety of girls, girl's schools are closed more often as compared to boy's schools, disproportionately affecting the education of girls. There were 1 in 5 girl schools temporarily closed in Swat in October 2009 (Education Policy and Data Center, 2010). In 2010, following threats from the Taliban on girls' education, an estimated 900 government and private schools were closed, preventing 120,000 girls from accessing school (Save the Children, 2013). The 2013 ASER study results show that 129 out of the total 5,653 rural schools surveyed were temporarily closed during the school year 2012-2013. Out of these, 21% schools were temporarily closed due to conflict. The survey also identified 9 schools which remained closed for more than 60 days of the educational year. The closures of schools have a negative effect on the quality of teaching and learning and ultimately on children's education attainment.

In addition to the loss of human life and material losses, O'Malley (2010) identifies the longer term effects on education such as the negative impact on teachers' and staff retention and recruitment, traumatization of children, teachers and staff, postponement of reconstruction and repairs, shelving of investments in upgrading of facilities and reduced capacity to manage the system or suspension of system.

In conflict-affected countries, funds that could have been spent on education are often diverted to fighting armed conflict. Pakistan is one of twenty-one countries that spend more of its budget on the military than on primary education. Pakistan spends seven times more on its military than on primary education (GMR 2012).

Persistent violent conflict leads to the lack of education provision, undermining the most critical intervention for achieving social and economic development in the very places that need it the most. And where the government lacks the capacity or will to manage the education system, the effects will continue to be felt for years after the violent conflict has ended threatening not only the affected areas but the entire region.

What can be done? Some Recommendations

Accept the fact of violent conflict: We have to accept that Pakistan is in the grip of violent conflict affecting all citizens and all aspects of life. Children are especially affected as they are being deprived of the opportunity to receive an education and to make a future.

Identify and address the causes of violent conflict: Identify and challenge the norms and values that tolerate, support and have led to the creation of a culture of violence in Pakistan society. Identify and challenge the norms, values and behaviors of the perpetrators of violence and provide them alternative values and skills that will allow them to live productive and peaceful lives. Ensure all children their right to education as provided in Article 25A of the Constitution of Pakistan. Improve the education system so as to improve access, quality, relevance and attainment. Provide opportunities for skills development of youth so as to improve their employment opportunities, move them and their families out of poverty and create possibilities for a better and brighter future for themselves and the country.

Protection and Provision: Give priority to protecting children during violent conflict and ensuring them their right to education. Create safe zones around schools and get combatants to respect them. Investigate and prosecute perpetrators of violence against schools, their staff and student. Put in place an Education Monitoring Information System (EMIS) to support an understanding of what is

happening on the ground, for needs assessment and to address both short-term needs and support long-term recovery. Encourage and support community initiatives to increase access to education. Provide accelerated learning opportunities to those affected by conflict and violence. Immediately repair damaged schools buildings and reconstruct schools and classrooms as soon as the area returns to a semblance of peace. Set up a National Commission on Education in Violence affected areas comprising of persons from both government and civil society to ensure protection and support the education of children during conflict and to facilitate the recovery of communities once conflict is over.

Use Education to build a culture of peace: Develop a national program of action to confront the culture of violence, build confidence in the future and set Pakistan on a path to peace. Start a campaign that encourages people to respond forcefully to the epidemic of violence that holds the country today in its grip. Develop the education system to serve as an agent of transformation rather than reproduction. Reform the curriculum and textbooks especially social studies/Pakistan studies, history and the languages which have been shown to promote hatred and incite young people to violence and militancy. Integrate peace education across the curriculum (Begum), educate teachers to provide a quality education in general and to understand and work for peace in particular, to use instructional strategies that help students recognize the multiple identities they have, to respect cultural diversity and to study and work for peace. Make schools non-violent environments. Post conflict use education to build peace. Start an education program of value and behavior change for those who perpetrate violence.

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