

Children with Disability Deprived from Basic Right to Education, Lack of Accessible Facilities – Evidence and Call for Action from ASER 2023

INTRODUCTION

Children with disabilities are those who are identified with (a) deafness and speech impairment, (b) blindness, (c) autism, (d) mental health issues, (e) physical disability, and (f) learning disabilities. They need focused remedial services based on a specific rehabilitation plan. National laws and policies define *disability* as “a long term physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses or activities and shall include physical, mental, intellectual and developmental disorders or sensory impairments” ([Pakistan, ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020](#)), whereas according to [Disabled World \(2009\)](#) an individual with disability is a person who has physical or mental impairment that severely influences the performing of one’s regular activities. The words *disabled* and *disability* are often used in an undesirable context in Pakistani society ([Malik et al., 2022](#)). In Pakistan, children with disabilities are not integrated into the society and encounter multiple challenges such as a lack of access to health facilities, funds, and qualified educational staff to satisfy to their needs.

Compared with other countries in Asia, Pakistan has a lack of reliable empirical evidence on the prevalence and status of individuals with disabilities. The challenge of lack of observation has been debated by many national and international agencies, such as the [United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO, 1999\)](#), [Japan International Cooperation Agency \(JICA, 2002\)](#) and United Nations Children’s Fund. In the past few decades, the Pakistani government has initiated different attempts to collect accurate data regarding persons with disabilities in the population censuses of 1961, 1981, and 1998. However, these efforts have been unsuccessful due to insufficient clarity of the facts and figures, and apprehensions regarding underreporting due to issues of social stigma. Children with diverse needs in Pakistan are facing varied problems such as societal discrimination, shame, and stigma and have insufficient access to quality education ([The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2014](#)). Pakistan has formulated the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* to determine the rights of these individuals, including the right to education. Followed by this, Pakistan has also ratified the *World Conference of Education for All* ([UNESCO, 1990](#)), the *Salamanca Declaration* ([UNESCO, 1994](#)), and the *Dakar Framework for Action of Education for All* ([Pakistan Institute of Development Economics \[UNICEF\], 2004](#)). While the Pakistani government has initiated different programs for the well-being of

students with disabilities, the provision of facilities still is not a priority ([Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2005](#)).

According to the survey of Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data taken by the National Database and Registration Authority ([Government of Pakistan \[NADRA\], 2020](#)), there are 371,833 children with disabilities in Pakistan across disability areas such as blindness (19,643), deafness and speech impairment (25,183), physical disabilities (295,093), and intellectual disabilities (31,914).

The *Annual Status of Education Reports* ([ASER-Pakistan, 2017](#)) examined extensive disparities between richer and poorer cities in rural Pakistan and, even within the richest cities, it was found that poor girls perform unsatisfactory more often than their richer counterparts ([Alcott & Rose, 2015](#)). ASER also presented emerging evidence on both access and learning for children with disabilities in the Punjab province in Pakistan ([Malik et al., 2022](#)). Many children with diverse needs are learning the fundamentals in numeracy and literacy, although their chances of learning the basics are more constrained compared with their peers in a context of overall very low levels of learning. However, other factors (e.g., parental background, socioeconomic status, and the type of school attended) are also considered. In emerging countries, including Pakistan, children with diverse needs are more vulnerable as compared with children in the developed world ([Harland, 2002](#); Hameed & Manzoor, 2019). In Pakistan, such children face the binary problem of (a) having a disability, and (b) growing up in a developing country, hence making them more vulnerable in all walks of life ([Ali et al., 2014](#)).

For inclusion of children with disability into a normal school, it is important for relevant facilities to be present including accessible infrastructure: ramps, wide doorways handrails and accessible toilets¹. Assistive devices such as wheel chairs, hearing aids and communication boards are necessary for make the schools more inclusive as well as trained staff/teachers.² In Pakistan, at least 50% of the schools do not have either of these facilities³.

Baharta a disabled child from Umerkot, Sindh: showed his willingness to go to school if the school is accessible or close enough to his house, he also reported that there are few other children in his community who can't access the school due to lack of accessible facilities for inclusion.

Baharta's mother appealed to the government that she would want his son to learn and be self-sufficient so that he can take care of himself when he grows old and doesn't have anybody's assistance.

¹ [Directorate General of Special Education, M/o Human Rights \(dgse.gov.pk\)](#)

² [Services for Children with Disabilities | Childcare.gov](#)

³ [aser_national_2023.pdf \(asERPakistan.org\)](#)

Implementation of Policy Legislation for Children with Disabilities

Significant special education initiatives, including the National Policy for Persons with Disability ([Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Women Development, Social Welfare, and Special Education, 2002](#)), have been taken in Pakistan to provide equal opportunities for education to the children with disabilities. This is the exclusive document delineating the government's purpose statement and vision in this domain and presents a holistic approach for the overall benefits of individuals with disabilities pertaining to all aspects of their lives in the community and society. Moreover, it states, "At the international level, the movement towards making education an integral part of education has been gaining ground. Integration of children with disabilities in normal systems of education shall therefore be promoted at all levels" (p.7). Hence, this policy emphasizes the rationale to provide the focused rehabilitation and education that is desired at the international level.

Although the policy's aim of mainstreaming individuals with disabilities is significant, the lack of execution remains a major worry. Another initiative, *The National Plan of Action* ([Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Women Development, Social Welfare, and Special Education, 2006](#)), recommends measures to operationalize the policy and notes that access, inclusion, and stabilization of prospects for those with disabilities are not possible through inaccessible interventions. The NPA indicates 17 domains of intervention, from assessment of the extent of the problem to service delivery systems, with a long-term plan to be achieved by July 2025. Furthermore, it stresses the effective execution and development of social support and a social security program under the requirements of prevailing laws. Two additional documents contribute in the domain of disability in Pakistan, specifically the [Islamabad Declaration on Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities \(2006\)](#) and the [Islamabad Declaration on Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities \(2009\)](#), both of which have been the result of many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) coming together to sustain a responsibility regarding disability issues. However, neither of these documents have any authorized status, although they are insightful of the existing state. Thus, in a nutshell, Pakistan is still in a segment of designing inclusive policies but operationalizing only a few small-scale projects rather than a national commitment ([Singal, 2015](#)).

POLITICAL PROMISES AND THE PATH FORWARD

The major political parties of Pakistan including PPP & PML(N)'s, PTI's Manifesto have discussed the notion of Inclusion at length mentioning the initial commitment for inclusion to be the documentation and registration of people with disability along with provision of accessible transportation and schooling infrastructure in public & private educational institutions.

Furthermore, political participation from the disabled individuals will be encouraged along with facilitating the voter registration procedure.

PPP and PML(N) have promised in their Manifesto for the formation of Disability Commissions in provinces to work towards eliminating infrastructural and attitudinal barriers towards mainstreaming persons with disabilities. PML (N) also committed for having specialized educational sports trainers for children with disability along with the provision of skill centers, NFE centers to make them self-sufficient.

PML(N) has also committed for the hiring of doctors, health workers, legislators for safeguarding the rights of individuals with disability. In addition to the formation of Special Education policy, Centralized special education department and the development of special schools at the tehsil level.

PTI's Manifesto emphasized on the promotion of inclusion at higher education level.

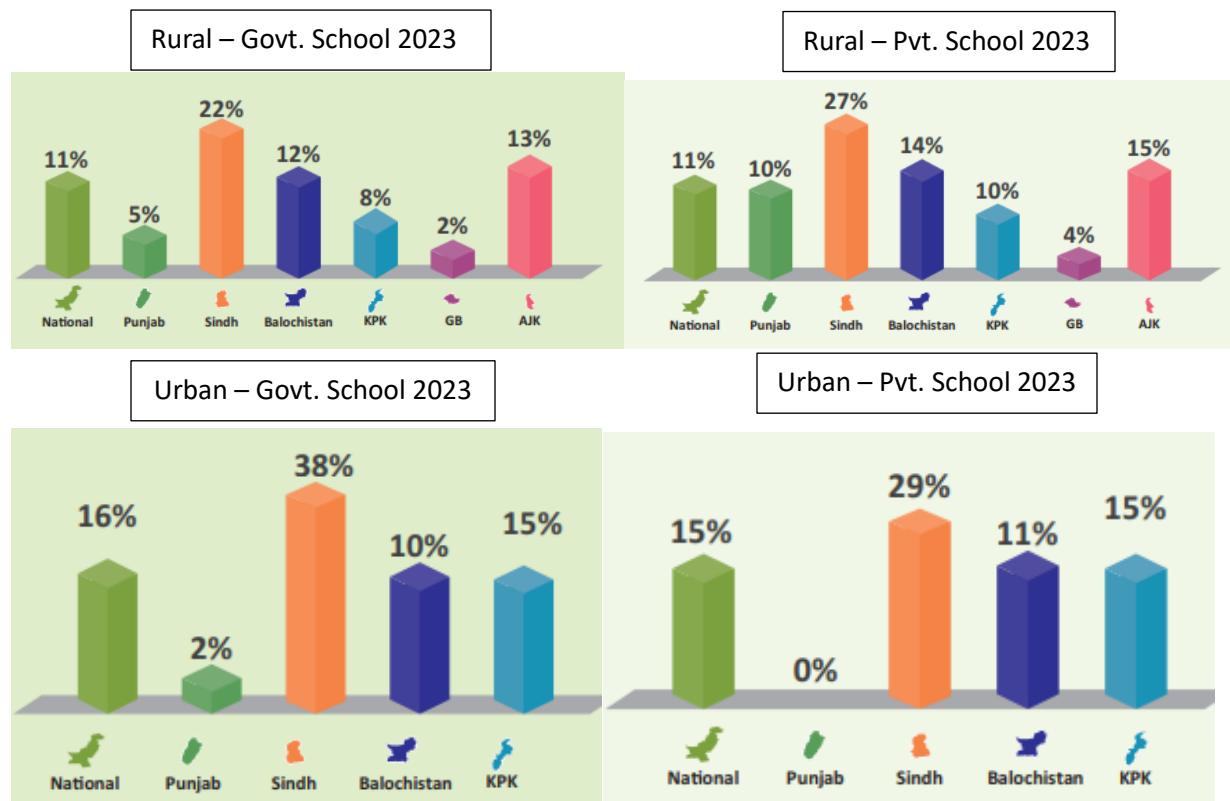
THE NATIONWIDE ASER 2023 DATA REVEALS THE FOLLOWING TRENDS:

As part of the school-level survey, data on children with disabilities (CWDs) was also collected. Head teachers/teachers were interviewed using the Washington-UNICEF Short Set of questions, also known as the Washington Group/UNICEF Module on Child Functioning, which assesses children against 6 functioning's i.e., visual, hearing, physical, intellectual, self-care and communication with others.

Enrollment of Children with Disability

At the national rural level, 11% of the surveyed government schools (21% in 2021) and 11% private schools (24% in 2021) reported to have children with disabilities. Sindh have the highest number of schools having children with disability in both government and private while Gilgit Baltistan have the lowest number of schools having children with disability.

At national urban level, 16% of the surveyed government schools and 15% private schools reported to have children with disabilities. Sindh have the highest number of schools having children with disability in both government and private schools while Punjab have the lowest number of schools having children with disability.



% of Inclusive Facilities in Schools

Also as part of the school survey data on the accessibility/inclusion facilities for children with disability was also assessed. Observation was made on the availability of ramps, accessible toilets, health & nutrition officer and other facilities were assessed.

Ramps

At the national rural level, 23% of the surveyed government schools (19% in 2021) and 65% private schools (23% in 2021) reported to have ramps. Punjab have the highest percentage government (48%) and private schools (77%) with facility of ramps, while Balochistan have the lowest percentage of government schools (6%) and private schools (0%) with the ramp facility.

At the national urban level, 43% of the surveyed government schools and 43% private schools reported to have ramps. Punjab have the highest percentage government (61%) and private schools (72%) with facility of ramps, while Balochistan have the lowest percentage of government schools (0%) and private schools (20%) with the ramp facility.

“We do not have children with physical disability but do have a ramp, which was made for the previous elections as the school was a polling station”, Government School Teacher Badin

Accessible Toilets

At the national rural level, 51% of the surveyed government schools (52% in 2021) and 61% private schools (47% in 2021) reported to have accessible toilets. Punjab have the highest percentage government schools (67%) and Gilgit Baltistan have the highest percentage of private schools (76%) with accessible toilets. And Sindh have the lowest percentage of government schools (22%) and Balochistan have lowest percentage of private schools (0%) with accessible toilets.

At the national urban level, 69% of the surveyed government schools and 69% private schools reported to have accessible toilets. Punjab have the highest percentage government (93%) and private schools (97%) with accessible toilets, while Balochistan have the lowest percentage of government schools (20%) and private schools (0%) with accessible toilets.

Health & Nutrition Officer & Other Facilities

At the national rural level, 10% of the surveyed government schools (9% in 2021) and 12% private schools (16% in 2021) reported to have health & nutrition officer. 8% government schools (21% in 2021) and 21% private schools (30% in 2021) have other inclusive facilities.

At the national urban level, 12% of the surveyed government schools and 11% private schools reported to have health & nutrition officer. 26% government schools and 12% private schools have other inclusive facilities.

Conclusion

In the light of ASER 2023 Findings, we can observe a decline in the proportion of inclusive facilities relative to 2021 which has also resulted in a decline in the proportion of schools with students having disabilities. The provincial findings also display a similar pattern, with fewer inclusive schools as a result of declining facilities—which may have been caused by flooding.

Policy Recommendation

Impressive promises have been made by political parties (PML-N and PPP) in their party manifestos for promoting inclusion and inclusive education. The recommendations below are crafted to help the parties and decision makers in power to accelerate the implementation of manifesto promises⁴ and principles on inclusion & Inclusive education.

- **Registration & Documentation**

Registration and documentation of the children with disability is very important and the policy should be made in such a way that it should be done along with birth registration. Another phase of assessment should be carried out by the time a child is 5 years old the assessment and registration should be done in schools and should be promoted with the help of lady health workers to register the children with disability.

⁴ PML-N Manifesto & PPP Manifesto

- **Accessible Transportation**

Accessible public transportation infrastructure needs to be developed with amendments in the existing system, along with reserved seats for individuals with disability. Additionally, children with disability should be given transportation facility for commuting to the school.

- **Education Infrastructure**

The basic barrier for inclusion is unavailability of accessible facilities in school such as ramps, resource teachers, accessible toilets and other relevant resources. It is evident from the trends that decrease in facilities have led to decrease in percentage of inclusive schools.

- **Special Education policy, Centralized special education department**

A customized special education policy needs to be formulated catering to the types of disability and specific measures which will be undertaken for the inclusion at all educational levels. In addition, a centralized special education department will be formed which will be responsible for implementation and monitoring of the education policy measures and its outcomes.

Under the Special Education Policy and Special Education department doctor, health workers, legislators will be hired for safeguarding the rights of individuals with disability

- **Specialized Teachers, Sports trainers, Skill centers & NFE centers**

PML (N) government have promised the training of specialized teachers, sport facilitators and the formation of skill & NFE Centers. They are important for inclusion and development of the people with disability. This way individuals with disability can prove to be an asset and contribute to the economy positively rather than a liability.

- **Special schools at the tehsil level**

PML (N)'s manifesto clearly specifies the formation of Special/Inclusive schools at Tehsil levels. The focus of these schools will be to cater children with all kinds of disabilities including Autism and down syndrome.

The special schools will also promote the students with disability to pursue higher education.

- **Use of Technology**

The use of technology needs to be leveraged to provide learning opportunities for children with disabilities as providing laptop/tablets with the assessment of how they are used in addition to a weekly visit to the school or the resource teacher may visit the student.

Resources / References:

UNICEF 2021: Seen, Counted, included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities

[disability_data_28252021.pdf \(pbs.gov.pk\)](#)

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Global education monitoring report, 2020: Inclusion and education: all means all

[Youth with disabilities | United Nations Enable](#)

[Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\) | Division for Inclusive Social Development \(DISD\) \(un.org\)](#)

[Country Profile - Pakistan.pdf \(unicef.org\)](#)

[Directorate General of Special Education, M/o Human Rights \(dgse.gov.pk\)](#)

[Services for Children with Disabilities | Childcare.gov](#)

[aser_national_2023.pdf \(aserpakistan.org\)](#)