Group Development Pakistan

HEALING VOICES

AN ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S STORIES ON LIFE DURING AND IN THE AFTERMATH OF COIVID-19

Disclaimer

This report is based on a sample that includes the views of only 375 children from Pakistan. It can therefore not be considered as a representative sample. However, we have tried to be as inclusive as possible under the circumstances surrounding the pandemic and the preventive measures to follow to mitigate the spread of the Covid19. Hence, when the report quotes a certain percentage of "children," it only refers to those who took part in this story writing competition.

The study abides by the child safeguarding standards that UNICEF has recommended while conducting research with children. All information and activities linked to this report follow the principle of the *child's best interest.*

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1 Introduction

Healing voices was a collection of children's essays, stories, and poems on the topic of "Life After the Covid-19". Submissions were collected from children between the ages of 8-18 across the entirety of Pakistan. They varied in their content, opinions, and experiences, but each one was a chilling reflection of how deep this pandemic has permeated. There was also an interpretive difference among the pieces on what a post-Covid world entailed. For some, it was a world where the vaccine exists and proliferated across the entire population. In contrast, others took it to mean a world in which the virus remained, but humanity adapted. As expected, with such diverse participation, the writings featured various subject areas that can be loosely categorized into thematic categories presented in section 2 of this report.

1.1. Objectives of the analysis

The critical areas of investigation for the analysis were.

    a. What were children's key concerns /messages during the Covid19 pandemic?

    b. What are children's themes in general via those stories?

    c. What actions could be taken to address those concerns?

It is hoped that the information contained in this analysis, and the subsequent recommendations, will be considered by law and policymakers when they devise their strategy to adjust to the new normal and the current or post covid-19 pandemic world.

1.2. Methodology

GDP launched a call for an online story writing competition for children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. **375 children (162 boys, 213 girls)** have taken part in the story writing competition *Healing Voices* from all over the country. After the call close-out date, all the stories were categorized into four groups to provide fair competition based on age and content. The first group consisted of participants of age group 5-7 years; the second group was for age 8-10 years; the third group included children of age 11-14 years, whereas the fourth category consisted of participants aged 15-18 years. The entries for both English and Urdu language were segregated to select the best stories. Two cash prizes were announced for the top two winners in the first

category, and three cash prizes were announced for the top three entries in each of the other three categories. A 14-member child jury was selected to rate the stories.

2 Analysis

2.1. Personal (health, family, finances)

As is consistent with any pandemic, the foremost concern was health, primarily physical, pertaining to the children themselves and their friends and family. While many children have already experienced death via losing a loved one, the sheer number and frequency of mortality during this pandemic have been staggering. It is that regularity and bombardment which the children found staggering. In several instances, the primary caregivers and providers were compromised via quarantine or illness, resulting in a sense of parental abandonment[1] and financial insecurity. One of the more startling revelations was the regularity with which children narrated becoming the primary emotional caretaker in their families, putting their fears and concerns aside to ease their parents' pain.

Finances were the other primary personal stressor, and here there was a noticeable class divide between the affected. Working-class families struggled disproportionately with unemployment, particularly when the work's nature was service/labor, e.g., cleaning, migrant labor. Upper-middle-class families were affected more by inflation and profiteering, so while they did feel financial pressure, it was not as intense as a complete loss of livelihood felt by the lower working class. This was also reflected in the participants' quarantine experiences, where there was a consensus across the board that the privileged generally had an easier time managing lockdown.[2]

There was also a surprisingly nuanced insight into the dangers of being stuck at home with one's family, as several children mentioned domestic violence risks. One child described how lockdown gives abusers increased proximity and access to their victims and how increased exposure to partner and gender-based violence, domestic abuse,

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[1] Several children commented on being separated from their families, some indefinitely, due to quarantine.
[2] Specifically the idea that it was far more comfortable being locked in a solid house than in a katchi abadi.

family conflicts, and civil unrest in general increases children's vulnerability to manipulation and recruitment by gangs and non-state actors. Another exciting development is the multiple references made to mental health concerns, including outright mentions of depression, anxiety, and trauma symptoms consistent with PTSD. Mental health has historically been taboo in the Pakistani culture, so to see children mentioning it across various socioeconomic classes is highly encouraging.

2.2.   Education

Every single non-fiction piece mentioned school closure which made this the second-largest theme after personal matters. The pandemic's impact on schooling and the educational system is undeniable, but what stands out is how poignant children's criticisms and commentary reinforce their status as the primary stakeholders in their education. Thereby the *most influential* voices should be children's when determining policy. Traditional teaching methods have been the most heavily affected, and again, the class divide is evident. Institutions with the resources and a more economically privileged student body have managed a smoother but still shaky transition to online learning.

In contrast, many less financially endowed schools have either shuttered completely or begun staggering children's attendance on alternating days. A majority of the participants experienced the latter, where they could not access any form of academic learning, which resulted in nearly unanimous feelings of stagnation and anxiety about being "left behind." Those who could attend virtual classes felt that the standard of learning was not the same, whether it was detractors in the form of connectivity issues[3] and distractions at home or the instructors could not convey the lesson across this new medium adequately. One particularly troubling submission detailed the anguish of being in a middle ground where the child's family earned enough to not qualify for the income support program laptops but did not earn enough for her father to have a smart phone. It is inequalities such as this[4] that demonstrate how disturbing it is that schools still charge full tuition despite not delivering on their promise of academic excellence.

[3] Relying on outdated technology or shared family computers, at the mercy of PTCL's notoriously unreliable internet connections.
[4] Particularly how access to technology makes remote learning disparate in its effectiveness.

The children's problems with education go beyond the limitations of institutions. Many have turned to the internet for knowledge in the absence of structured schooling and sparse information sharing from adults[5]. In doing so, they are vulnerable to a host of misinformation, ranging from conspiracy theories to political fear-mongering, religious rhetoric to WhatsApp threads. Several submissions recognized the danger of this and lamented that it was the schools' job to keep their students informed. Some also expressed concern that even when schools open, they are extremely unlikely to follow SOPs or even offer basic hygiene services. However, there was also an undertone of positive growth during quarantine, which was the realization that students can make their routines for studying and learning. This demonstrated another inherent deficiency in that schools' structure as they exist now is not necessarily conducive to an optimal learning environment or the development of the child.

2.3.   Humanitarian

One of the more uplifting themes among the submissions was a focus on charity and empathy. Pandemics and similar disasters evoke a feeling of solidarity and belief that everyone is in this together. Among the more privileged families, this entailed caring for the domestic help and supplementing their incomes even though they were not allowed to come in for work; for the working class and mainly rural communities, it was pitching in communally to purchase groceries or care for patients. While the commentary and experiences varied depending on each child's economic status, the sentiment remained constant across each piece. There was also an outright recognition of and appreciation for essential workers and jobs, which required people to work on the pandemic's front lines. This ranged from medical staff to shopkeepers, and it's truly the beauty of children's minds that allows them to recognize a fact many adults struggle with - there is no such thing as unskilled labor. One submission went so far as to critique our celebrity culture and ask why politicians and actors are given platforms and influence while specialists such as doctors and scientists are considered a lower tier. It remains an excellent question.

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[5] Multiple children mentioned how adults were not open or honest about the facts of Covid.

Keeping consistent with their tendency to offer surprisingly nuanced observations, several children expressed concern about rampant ageism and ableism in our society. This overlooked truth was spectacularly blatant during this pandemic. One child inquired why businesses operated without catering to elders and commented on the lack of elder-friendly services. Short of people above the age of 65 being given vaccine priority, there has been virtually no effort or outreach done on the accessibility front. Similarly, people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable during a pandemic, and they are the first to be cast by the wayside when it comes to service provision[6].

2.4.   Political

Matters of government are where children's understanding of our political structure begins to falter, and the influence of their parents, authority figures, and education becomes apparent. There was an inherent conflict in many accounts between how the government should impose a lockdown to enforce social distancing but simultaneously secure jobs and maintain the economy. However, this practical contradiction is a rhetoric being argued by a plurality of adults and some political figures. Hence, it is understandable that children would echo what they hear.

Regarding the former, many of the submissions expressed dismay at how rural areas were almost entirely neglected by the government as preventive measures and enforcement were nonexistent. There were even reports of police and military officers conducting their work without wearing masks. It is both problematic and demoralizing when children have a better understanding of SOPs than adults do. Especially as most children are visual learners and derive their values from the environment around them. Being told to maintain distance and wear a mask but then seeing adults disregard that advice entirely leads to extreme cognitive dissonance. At best, it's a reflection of pure ignorance; at worst, it teaches children that their comfort holds more importance than the greater public good.

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[6] One essay commented on the fact that beggars were prime carriers for Covid and how it was the government's responsibility to accommodate them.

There was consensus on the inadequacy of health services, both in ability and capacity, with over 40% of the participants calling for universal health insurance. Several students went beyond simply critiquing the healthcare system and identified structural weaknesses within the government institution itself, particularly poor civil engineering and city planning as demonstrated by cramped, unsanitary public transportation and crowded isolation-unfriendly infrastructure[7]. One child, mirroring the sentiments regarding bias in service provision, noted that government programs often exclude internally displaced people and migrant workers entirely, especially in katchi abadis and other such colonies where overcrowding and lack of water/sanitation is a lived reality. The overall tone was that things did not have to work out this way, but that poor organization and inadequate decisions worsened the pandemic. A final corollary to this fundamental distrust of authority was this notion that law enforcement was acting as an oppressive tool of the state to abduct and forcibly separate and quarantine people, which led to the conclusion that not only was the government not helping, but its overreach in the perceived "wrong" fields was actually harming those affected.

2.5. Religious

Religion is always a delicate subject to approach, especially when discerning between children's own beliefs and conditioning. As such, there was indeed a solid religious conviction among many children that this pandemic is either a divine test or punishment[8]. In many cases, this rhetoric was not followed up with much elaboration, but several insightful submissions still exist. Notable among them is one child who did not fear dying of Covid, but rather the idea of dying alone and not being granted a proper Muslim burial because of social distancing SOPs. Another lamented the loss of his place of worship, the masjid, to lockdown. He connected with God among the culture and community there and struggled to pray at home with the same conviction. While not religious commentary per se, one child reasoned that in many areas of the country, particularly less developed ones, people would not listen to science but do heed religious guidance. He followed this

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[7] A particularly novel idea from one of the children was that masjids should do away with carpeting entirely for sanitary reasons.
[8] Roughly 1/8th of the participants suggested Covid was punishment for immorality.

up with a suggestion that the focus should be on finding a way to use scripture and religion to educate and enforce hygienic practices and conformity with SOPs.

2.6. Existential

Existential worries are further up Maslow's hierarchy of needs, so it was surprising to see the number of participants grappling with existential worries. While this sort of angst is not uncommon among adults, the frequency with which it has impacted children suggests a far greater focus on psychosocial care than most care providers would assume. A recurring theme was helplessness - the feeling of impotence that accompanies an inability to control the virus' spread, mortality rate, or any predictable metric - the fear of an *invisible* threat vis-a-vis microbes and asymptomatic carriers. Despite taking every precaution, people are still contracting the disease and dying. This uncertainty regarding the imminence and looming specter of death and the future in general tinges every moment with anxiety. The resulting mental strain is oppressive, one exacerbated by the fact that elders refused to communicate honestly with children in many instances, thereby amplifying fear of something they were unable to understand.

One submission engaged with the concept of temporality and the significance we give to cultural constructs. Lockdown necessitated that people miss "once in a lifetime" events such as weddings, hajj, travel, and educational opportunities. The re-shifting of these priorities forcing people to address their actual significance. For many, board and final exams were the defining aspects of their academic careers, leaving them feeling bereft or as if their efforts thus far were in vain. Some managed to conclude that foregoing such events was not the end of the world, but others were mired in an understandably existential spiral. Coupled with this is the departure from cultural norms such as attending funerals. The loss of such tents led many to feel as if their values and life structure were being dismantled one staple at a time. A refreshingly poignant observation was the agency concept, which is largely a rare concept in traditional Pakistani culture - the notion that having restrictions on their actions, e.g., being prevented from leaving the house by an authority beyond one's parents, is a violation of their rights. While this was very much a minority opinion, it is noteworthy that it hints at a potential paradigm shift.

2.7. Future-Oriented

Submissions discussing the future were split roughly into emotions (hopefulness and fear) and suggestive predictions. 60% of the participants expressed hope for a new, better world, but a substantial percentage also relayed extreme stress regarding the fallout. Some feared socializing again after an entire year of isolation - the potential awkwardness of meeting people-, others worried about the damage to and degradation of friendships and relationships, which they struggled to maintain due to lack of communication. Others still expressed dismay at their life progress being halted, whether academically, athletically, or in other pursuits.

The participants' comforting ratio looked for silver linings and managed to find positive spins during their quarantine period. Several children took pride in their healthy lifestyle changes, mentioning improved hygiene, greater thriftiness due to market restrictions, engaging with charity work, spending more time with family, increased discipline, learning new hobbies, and committing active citizenry. Some found novel ways to stay connected amidst all the misery by engaging with friends remotely, doing socially distanced game sessions, developing artistic skills, and partaking in social justice projects. A few particularly astute readings included a suggestion that this pandemic required us to rely more on communication than ever before, which forced an evolution in the way we interact, an observation that this period helped close the generational gap between children and parents in the realm of technology[9], and that a complete lockdown was beneficial for the environment as it meant reduced pollution, cleaner air, and a return to nature[10].

Most of the predictive essays revolved around incorporating technology into our daily routines in a mainstream manner to enhance the quality of life. Drones and artificial intelligence were prevalent methods of streamlining processes. The children posited that a new industrial revolution is upon us, and technology holds the key to solving some of our most deep-seated problems. The most common element described was a transition

[9] With the recognition that this is perhaps the greatest generational gap since the industrial revolution.
[10] A surprisingly apt critique of capitalism.

from the presential to the productivity model for work, particularly physical presence. Additional suggestions for adjusting our behavior ranged from going paperless to relying less on touch to changing work shifts around traffic patterns to prevent congestion. It's interesting how children's collective consciousness enabled them to independently conclude that we need to adopt new ways of working, worship, and socialization - in essence, how we interact with the world. They identified several possible futures, all of which depend on how civilization chooses to proceed from here, on a governmental, business, and societal basis.

3 | Observations

Among the submissions, there was a general trend that handwritten ones featured more visceral and immediate, tangible concerns, whereas digital ones engaged with more existential issues and creative prompts[11]. On the matter of submissions themselves, there was a striking amount of plagiarism, wherein roughly 15% of the pieces were either copied from other sources or written by an adult. The morality of this is irrelevant, but this suggests that the prompt may not have been communicated enough to the children, who may have viewed it as a piece that would be judged rather than an opportunity for creative expression. More girls than boys mentioned working around the house and helping their parents more during this time. Interestingly, it was also almost entirely girls who were aware of their privilege and demonstrated or even explicitly accepted this fact in their writings. On the introspection topic, as mentioned earlier, the number of references made to mental health issues was inspiring. It suggests we may soon be ready to bring this discussion into the mainstream.

Many of the fiction submissions entailed conversations, often with an elder, and were presented in dialogue form. This is a quaint reflection of how important the oral tradition remains across generations and highlights these children's attempts to capture and maintain its sanctity. The majority of these portrayed the author (child) as the adult storyteller, and even more interestingly, several girls wrote their piece from a male perspective, i.e., they were the father. Over 30% of the stories concluded with unhappy endings with either the patient or a loved one dying. One child even provided a disclaimer that real life was not a fairy tale and did not always resolve in a happy ending. While macabre, it demonstrates how intensively children have had to mature during this time, which is further reflected by the fact that 60% of the stories mentioned feeling trapped.

Many children were aware of the specific *facts* of Covid but struggled with answers or what this meant going forward. Often, this was down to a forced communication gap between them and their elders. They mitigated this by doing their research. There was a

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[11] There could also be a correlation made regarding class, but it would be premature in the absence of additional data.

surprising level of citizen science among the children, i.e., they are far more scientifically and medically aware because of how mainstream the discourse has gotten and increased access to education. The most exciting takeaway is the sheer quantity of novel ideas these children offered for a better future. Pandemics have historically been precursors for social change. It will be a shame if we opt for a return to the old ways after this, not considering children's new ideas for the "new normal."

4 | Recommendations

Issue: Disparity in education quality based on financial means even at the same institution.

Recommendation: Schools themselves and the government should facilitate this transition via income support programs and loaned computers/technology. Additionally, there should be a greater attempt to disseminate hard copies of materials among children who cannot participate digitally.

Increased regulation of private schools, particularly regarding fee structures.

Rationale: One of the most common fears children shared was that of being left behind the rest of their class due to not having computer or internet access. It is a school's institutional responsibility as a center of learning to facilitate their mandate and ensure no child is neglected based on class.

Secondly, it is shocking for private schools to be charging the exorbitant fees they do without providing a fraction of the amenities that tuition pays for. The government either needs to regulate their pricing or ensure their service quality is proportional to the cost.

Issue: Profiteering.

Recommendation: Harsher punishments for those found guilty of violating MSRPs, particularly government-mandated ones, and communicate any price increases due to state policy.

Rationale: When citizenry but especially children see inconsistent trends and behaviors from the government, it breeds another layer of distrust and discontent between the new generation and their representatives, particularly as oftentimes they are not given any rationale for the additional economic hardship it entails. This makes it extremely difficult to take ownership of the decision in good faith. It also weakens civil society when profiteers are allowed to capitalize on disaster situations with impunity.

Issue: Increased exposure to abusers and domestic violence during the lockdown.

Recommendation: Establish a helpline and means of communication whereby children are informed of their rights and resources they can avail.

Rationale: In many instances, children are not told what their fundamental rights are or what they can do in abuse cases. There is a vested interest in elders keeping this

information from them for both benevolent and sinister reasons - either they believe children should not have to worry about and deal with such things, or in darker cases, it serves their purpose to keep children uninformed. A child-friendly, easy-to-access means of contacting these children, mainly via the internet, would go a long way towards outreach.

Issue: No consistently accessible stream of information for children.

Recommendation: Child-friendly, non-academic channels for children to stay scientifically and practically informed.

Rationale: Not everything we teach *needs* to be academic. A common complaint from the participants was their perceived inability to do anything to help in this pandemic, and that feeling stems almost entirely from being uninformed. This ties into the previous issue as well, where we as a society want children to remain children. Unfortunately, in the absence of reliable means of communication, children will turn to the internet. While it is a potent tool for knowledge, it is also a potential minefield of misinformation and manipulation. The primary institutions need to a) be consistent in their message, e.g., not flip-flop about the severity of this pandemic, and b) consistently provide that information in a digestible, relatable manner. Additionally, these learning streams should also focus on life skills that will allow children to reclaim a sense of agency and ownership over their lives.

Issue: Psychosocial care for children.

Recommendation: Create a toolkit in conjunction with child traumatologists to help affected children navigate the existential and mental health issues that accompany such an unstable time.

Rationale: It is unnatural for children (or any human) to be bombarded with this much death and reminders of mortality. Our youth is collectively experiencing a form of post-traumatic stress. It is the state and society's responsibility to ensure that children's emotional and mental stability is being accommodated and their physical well-being. Many children engaged with mental health themes, and while there *is* a taboo regarding that subject in Pakistan, the stakes are too high to continue to ignore it when an entire generation is at risk.

Issue: Inclusivity in service provision.

Recommendation: Consult with NGOs and stakeholders themselves from disabled, elder, migrant, displaced, and impoverished communities to ensure that they are not being overlooked when it comes to pandemic relief.

Rationale: Particularly in the case of beggars and displaced people, society and specifically the state have collectively ignored these communities to design and implement its policies. That is not to say that the intention is not there. Still, rather enforcement and accessibility will remain a challenge until the people who are meant to benefit from these endeavors are also helping design policy. This also holds true for children who are often silenced or forgotten when their input is actually needed despite being the primary stakeholders.

Issue: Incorporating religion positively.

Recommendation: Collaborating with madrassahs and religious actors to make SOPs and similar guidance more relatable.

Rationale: A popular rhetoric has been this idea that Covid is a form of punishment from God for our collective immorality. Religion has always been a powerful tool of influence, and not capitalizing on that to spread positive messages is a massive oversight. Some of the children themselves suggested using Islamic teachings to help enforce social distancing and hygiene because a large percentage of the population distrusts government and science in favor of religious guidance.

Issue: Integrating technology into a daily routine from an efficiency standpoint.

Recommendation: Where possible (and if anything, this pandemic has demonstrated that it is possible nearly everywhere), switch to video meetings and similarly efficient means of communication.

Rationale: Face-to-face meetings have always been an enormous financial and temporal drain. Similarly, many schools have switched to seminar-type lectures where the teacher posts a video in Khan Academy's style, which children subsequently watch and follow up. This has the added benefit of being more inclusive to people with disabilities for whom physical presence may not always be a feasible option. There has been a massive culture shift, and from an efficiency standpoint, it would be retrogressive to return to a presence

model over a performance one. This pandemic has been the most robust case for a 3-4 day work week.

Issue: Work-Life balance

Recommendation: As a follow-up to the previous point, recognizing and enforcing boundaries between school and home, work and home, particularly while working or learning from home.

Rationale: A common tenet of capitalism is the expectation that employees be constantly available, regardless of time. This has only gotten more pronounced during the pandemic as working from home shifted those boundaries to the extent that people are always expected to be "on." It manifests differently for students for whom taking an exam at home might prove difficult due to the lack of privacy or even in instances where children are told not to eat or go to the bathroom during a class, even while they are sitting in their own homes. While this is not a specific policy recommendation, it is a significant enough warning sign that it warranted discussion, especially as several children commented on it.

Issue: Child engagement via non-physical or face-to-face activities.

Recommendation: Encouraging new forms of interactivity between children using traditionally ignored media, e.g., video games.

Rationale: As we are on the cusp of an industrial, or at least technological, revolution, it is imperative to accept new means of engagement, and chief among them is the digital realm of games. E-Sports are a rapidly developing field with professional contracts worth millions of USD. It was a spectator event at the 2018 Asian Games, and there are even discussions regarding its presence at the Olympics. It is the perfect avenue to engage children as it develops reflexes, communication, teamwork, analytical thinking, spatial awareness and allows children to understand computer hardware and software - all skills that can be laterally transferred into life skills. The KP government has already explored this as a pilot option, but with the prevalence of companies looking for new events to sponsor, there is a compelling case to invest in E-Sports.