



# Policy Brief

## MANDATING CONSENT EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN – EVIDENCE FROM THE EMPOWERED CHOICES: A CURRICULUM FOR UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES AND CONSENT

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### INTRODUCTION

Ensuring protection, self-possession, and psychological well-being of children and adolescents are essential to a healthy society. Although Pakistan has developed a progressive legal framework for child protection but the educational curricula or what is taught in classrooms fails to reflect this commitment to protection hence creating a critical implementation gap. Such as legislation like the Anti-Rape Act, 2021, and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, provide legal remedies for after the damage has been done, However, the national and provincial syllabi lag in preventive education. Which can enable a child to identify and safely report these issues. The gravity to address this gap is highlighted by alarming data; organizations like Sahil report that an average of 12 children is subjected to sexual abuse daily in Pakistan, and the percentage is increasing every year (Cruel Numbers – Sahil). Most cases involving known individuals go unreported due to disgrace, fear, and a persistent lack of awareness.

This policy brief offers the findings and recommendations from the implementation of pilot 'Empowered Choices: A Curriculum for Understanding Boundaries and Consent'. It is a wide-ranging curriculum appropriate to cognitive and emotional development for learners aged 5 to 18. The initiative works on the main principle that prevention is more effective than post incident action, and that empowering children with knowledge, awareness, vocabulary, and self-assurance is a necessity of the time. The assessment has been conducted in an environment of cultural and traditional restraints, inconsistency across institutions, and a legal landscape where consent education is neither standardized nor mandated. This brief advocate that based on the observational study collected evidence, the systemic incorporation of consent education into Pakistan's educational curricula is not only achievable but required immediately to protect coming generations.



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## METHODOLOGY

The 'Empowered Choices: A Curriculum for Understanding Boundaries and Consent' is developed and piloted as a research project under the RASTA Competitive Grants Program at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE). The methodology was designed to assess the curriculum's applicability, efficiency, and cultural alignment across various Pakistani educational settings through an organized, multi-phase approach.

**Phase 1: Institutional Engagement and Achieving Approval:** The team of researchers held formal meetings with the senior administration of a selected sample of both the public and private of educational institutes across different regions. The objective was to effectively explain the vision of the curriculum, achievable aim, and coherence with national priorities for child protection agenda. This phase was essential to obtain formal approval for the implementation of the pilot and to gain insight understanding of organizational concerns and operational constraints.

**Phase 2: Instructor Training and Capacity Building:** After securing institutional approval, few training sessions were conducted with the instructors nominated to deliver the curriculum. These sessions were collaborative workshops focused on instructive methodologies. Instructors were trained in practices of trauma-informed care, age-appropriate communication (verbal and non-verbal) strategies, the utilization of designed teaching aids of this pilot (worksheets, flashcards, infographics), and procedures for addressing sensitive disclosures including legal practices. The focus was on moving a step ahead from a theoretical knowledge to effective and comfortable application in the classroom, preparing instructors to become facilitators of respecting boundaries and consent.

**Phase 3: Facilitating Curriculum Delivery and Observing Learner Engagement via Interactive Seminars:** In the next stage a series of structured interactive seminars were held with students (only in the institutions that allowed seminars). The seminars were held at three levels: Early Learners (5-9 years), Middle Learners (10-13 years), and Adolescents (14-18 years). These seminars involved guided discussions, scenario-based analysis, thoughtful journaling, worksheet-based activities and songs and poems composed under this pilot were used to teach about body and safe touch specifically for early learners. The seminars were conducted on the nature IB (International Baccalaureate) and learning objectives from this pilot was embedded in the school schedule, with related subjects (e.g., a computer teacher discussing cyberbullying during a lesson on internet safety). It was done to see the possibility that whether this curriculum can be taught in the emerging global educational programs or not, and it turned out to be successful.

### *Collection of Data and Analysis*

A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Data was collected through:

- Structured observation forms completed by the team of researchers during seminars.
- Post-seminar feedback forms from instructors.
- Focus group discussions with selected groups of students and educators.



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- Analysis of completed worksheets of students by the team of psychologists.

This collected data was then provided to different psychologists; emotional health psychologist, clinical psychologist and educational psychologist to identify areas for curricular refinement. Their reviews were studied and based on their suggestions the curriculum was modified accordingly.

## 3. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of pilot produced substantial insights and identified possible challenges, which mutually form a compelling case for policy action.

### *Demonstrated Effectiveness and Constructive Engagement*

The curriculum was extremely effective in engaging learners across all age groups. The activity-based approach and integrated approach with other subjects ensured relevance. For Tier I (5-9 years), songs like “My Body belongs to me” and activities like “Safe/Unsafe Touch” helped in understanding the sensitive concepts, resulting in visible progress in youngsters’ capability to naming and recognizing private parts and trusted adults. For other tiers, scenario-based discussions on digital consent and third-party involvement resulted in active participation and critical thinking. Importantly, the integration of PYP or MYP strategies of integrating concepts across different subjects proved successful for indirect and reinforced learning. After the Workshops and seminars, instructors and students showed comfort using key vocabulary (consent, boundaries, breach, harassment, bad touch) and expressed more confidence to say “no” or seek help.

### *Structural and Resource Gaps*

Despite this success, some systemic gaps were recognized:

- **Resource Limitations:** During the phase of implementation of pilot project, all necessary physical resources (booklets, worksheets, posters, brochures, stationary) were provided by the research team. Extreme reluctance of institutes is observed time and again, both private and public, to offer their own budgetary or physical resources to such initiatives. This presented us with a serious sustainability challenge; without mandated allocation of funds, extensive implementation will be financially not possible.
- **Linguistic and Cultural Adaptation:** At the Initial stage implementation was in English language specifically written resources which proved to be a significant barrier to approachability, mostly in public sector institutes and far-flung regions. As a result, curriculum and workbook and all other important documents were translated into Urdu, which instantly enhanced understanding and engagement. Moreover, visits to diverse and remote regions presented us with complex cultural perceptions. In some remote areas, these concepts were initially met with hesitancy from instructors and parents, perceived as unmentionable or taboo. As a result, intentional and careful improvisation was performed:



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altering jargon, adding more culturally acceptable examples, and stressing the Islamic and ethical values of respect and bodily protection. The pilot curriculum was afterward polished to reflect these sensitivities, demonstrating that culturally informed consent education is possible and acceptable.

- **Disparities in Readiness and Willingness Across Sectors:** A striking difference was observed between private and government institutes. It was seen that private institutes have some existing, though limited policy like as a school psychologist or a minimal anti-bullying policy. However, it was typically a reactive approach, focused on career counseling or addressing only grave incidents after they happened, rather than a preventive educational approach. Government institutes mostly do not have any framework and showed a more noticeable institutional reluctance, often entrenched in bureaucratic inertia, resource constraints and learners and parents expressed skepticism about the need for such education.

## *The Need of Policy Backing*

The most important finding is the absence of a top-down policy mandate, and it is the greatest blockade to institutional adoption. Many institutes declined to participate in the pilot just because the program does not have the official approval of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) or the relevant governmental support. This underlines that voluntary initiatives, no matter how strongly evidence-based, experience significant challenges without the force of policy, which make implementation totally impossible.

The 'Empowered Choices, A Curriculum for Understanding Boundaries and Consent' pilot proved that an organized, culturally adapted curriculum is effective and can be taught within Pakistan's diverse learning environment. However, its success is at present restricted by the limitations of a project-based model. The major finding is that for this curriculum to become widespread, unbiased, and sustainable, it must evolve from a pilot initiative to a compulsory constituent of the national educational policy.

## **4. KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Following recommendations are made to federal and provincial education authorities based on experiential evidence gathered.

**1. Enforceable Policy Directive for Curriculum Integration:** The Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training, in collaboration with all Provincial Education Departments, needs to issue a mandatory directive for the integration of age-appropriate consent and boundary education into the national curricula, including the Single National Curriculum (SNC). Moreover, there is a need to state learning outcomes for each grade level or age group, changing the status of consent education from an optional need based subject to a fundamental subject of education.



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**2. Allocation of Dedicated Funds for Implementation:** Policy must be beckoned with resources. It is recommended that Education ministries allocate dedicated funds for the further development, printing, and dissemination of standardized instructional and learning resources in both Urdu and English. This will mitigate the financial constraints identified during the pilot and ensure uniform implementation in all institutes irrespective of their financial capacity.

**3. Comprehensive Instructor Training Across Institutions:** The HEC and Provincial Education Departments should make Consent Education and Child Safeguarding' segment a compulsory in all teacher training programs (B.Ed., M.Ed.). Moreover, professional development workshops, structured on the pilot's successful training sessions, must be carried out for in-service teaching staff.

**4. Monitoring and Institutional Accountability:** It is suggested that the directive should also necessitate all educational institutes to develop and display clear child protection and anti-harassment policies that align with laws. Furthermore, a monitoring and constant evaluation procedure or system should be designed to make the implementation of this curriculum more effective.

Through the adoption of these recommendations, Pakistan fill the critical gap between law and existed safety for its children and adolescents. The 'Empowered Choices: A Curriculum for Understanding Boundaries and Consent' pilot serves as a blueprint. Now political and administrative role is required to make it a national reality, ensuring every child understands that their body belongs to them, and their boundaries must be respected.