OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Subhan Khan Dotani.

Pakistan.

Email: subhankhandotani5560@gmail.com

Inputs for study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats.

Abstract

This article responds to the call for inputs by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on promoting digital education for young people and ensuring their protection from online threats in Pakistan. In Pakistan, the digital landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for young people. The study examines the legal and policy frameworks, challenges, and potential solutions concerning the human rights of young people in the digital realm, and measures to protect youth from online threats. Statistics and examples highlight the specific situation in Pakistan.

Introduction

Pakistan, like many nations, grapples with the dynamic landscape of digital opportunities and challenges. This article contributes to the High Commissioner's study by exploring the nuances of digital education and the protection of young people from online threats.

Challenges in accessing digital education

In Pakistan, the digital education landscape grapples with inherent issues, foremost being the limited technological infrastructure. Many regions, particularly rural and remote areas, lack reliable internet connectivity and technological resources (Figure No.1), hindering access to online educational platforms. This digital divide is further pronounced by economic disparities, where a substantial portion of the population struggles to afford the necessary devices and internet subscriptions for effective digital learning. (Figure No.4)

Cultural barriers also play a significant role, as conservative norms may restrict certain demographics, particularly girls, from accessing digital education. Socio-cultural attitudes toward technology can limit the acceptance and integration of online learning in educational practices. Language barriers present another challenge, as digital education content is often delivered in specific languages, potentially excluding those who speak regional languages or dialects not well-represented online.

Moreover, a considerable portion of the population, including young people, may lack adequate digital literacy skills necessary for effective online learning. (Figure No.5) This is particularly pertinent for marginalized youth, who face additional barriers in navigating online learning platforms and resources due to limited exposure to digital technologies.

Gender-based disparities persist in Pakistan, with young girls facing more significant challenges in accessing education, including digital education. Marginalized girls may experience compounded challenges due to both economic constraints and gender-specific barriers, limiting their opportunities in the digital learning sphere.(Figure No.3) Additionally, inadequate government support poses a challenge, necessitating a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to ensure that marginalized communities benefit fully from digital education initiatives.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and the community. Tailored policies, infrastructure development, and educational programs are imperative to ensure that digital education becomes a tool for empowerment rather than a source of exclusion for young people, particularly those in marginalized and vulnerable situations, in Pakistan.

Government Initiatives to Promote Digital Education Accessibility in Pakistan

Recognizing the pivotal role of digital education in shaping the future of Pakistan's youth, the government has implemented various initiatives aimed at ensuring accessibility and promotion of online learning opportunities. These efforts span legislative frameworks, regulatory measures, policies, and specific programs tailored to guarantee universal access to digital education.

One notable stride is the formulation of laws and regulations that address the challenges associated with digital education accessibility. The government has proactively worked towards creating an enabling legal environment, exemplified by laws that mandate the provision of digital infrastructure in educational institutions and emphasize the integration of technology in the learning process. Additionally, regulatory measures have been put in place to ensure the quality and inclusivity of digital education, fostering an environment that caters to the diverse needs of the youth.

In tandem with legal and regulatory frameworks, the government has rolled out targeted national policies that prioritize digital education accessibility. The Digital Pakistan Policy outlines strategic goals for promoting digital inclusion. It emphasizes providing equal access to digital education for all segments of society, with a specific focus on marginalized and vulnerable youth. National policies include provisions for expanding digital infrastructure in remote and underserved areas. This includes investments in broadband connectivity and the establishment of digital hubs to enhance access. Furthermore, Initiatives include the distribution of digital devices, such as laptops or tablets, to students in need, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs aim to eliminate the economic barrier to accessing online learning resources, thereby fostering a more inclusive digital education ecosystem.

Collaboration with private sector entities has also been a key strategy. Public-private partnerships have been forged with technology companies to enhance technological infrastructure in

educational institutions. This includes the provision of digital content, software, and hardware to facilitate a more technologically advanced learning environment.

In summary, the Government of Pakistan has taken comprehensive steps to promote digital education accessibility among young people. Through legislative frameworks, regulatory measures, policies, and targeted programs, the commitment to ensuring universal access to online learning is evident. These efforts underscore a strategic vision to harness the potential of digital education for the empowerment of the youth, emphasizing inclusivity and equal opportunities for all. (Figure No.6)

Fostering a Secure and Inclusive Digital Space for Pakistani Youth: Government Initiatives on Online Human Rights

The Government of Pakistan is actively shaping a digital landscape that prioritizes the realization of human rights for young people online. With a commitment to safety, empowerment, and inclusivity, several measures and initiatives have been implemented to create an environment that safeguards online freedoms.

In the realm of legislation, The National Cybersecurity Policy reinforces these efforts by the enactment of cybercrime laws addresses offenses related to online harassment and bullying, providing a legal framework to protect young people from digital threats. The government has launched the National Digital Literacy Program, aiming to equip young people with the knowledge and skills necessary for responsible online behavior. Public awareness campaigns play a crucial role in informing young people about online safety measures and raising awareness about potential threats. These campaigns empower individuals to protect themselves online and report any violations of their rights.

Collaboration with social media platforms is a key strategy, with the government engaging with these platforms to enhance safety features and mechanisms that protect young users. This collaborative effort ensures a secure online space for the country's youth.

The government has established hotlines and reporting platforms where young people can report online threats and violations of their rights. These reporting mechanisms facilitate prompt responses to incidents and enhance the overall safety of the online space. Privacy protection measures, including data protection laws, are in place to safeguard the personal information of young people online. These laws contribute to creating a secure online environment that respects individuals' privacy rights.

In conclusion, the multifaceted initiatives undertaken by the Government of Pakistan underscore its dedication to ensuring that young people can exercise their human rights online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive manner. Through legal frameworks, cybersecurity measures, educational programs, collaborative efforts, and youth engagement, the government aims to create a digital space that is not only secure but also fosters the empowerment and inclusion of diverse voices.

Challenges and Gaps in Protecting Young People from Online Threats in Pakistan: Impact on Human Rights

Pakistan grapples with significant challenges and gaps in safeguarding young people from online threats, encompassing legal, policy, and practical dimensions. The existing cybercrime legislation, while in place, may exhibit limitations in addressing the rapidly evolving nature of online threats. Enforcement challenges further hinder accountability for perpetrators, leaving vulnerabilities unaddressed, especially among marginalized and vulnerable youth.

In the realm of policies, the lack of comprehensive frameworks tailored to the diverse range of online threats is apparent. Existing policies may not sufficiently address the unique challenges faced by marginalized young people, perpetuating inequalities in protection. Practical implementation issues compound the problem, with insufficient digital literacy among both youth and educators hindering effective protection. Additionally, inadequate reporting mechanisms, which are not user-friendly and widely accessible, pose challenges, particularly for marginalized youth with limited awareness and connectivity.

The impact on human rights is profound, as online threats often lead to violations of privacy and freedom of expression. Cyberbullying, a prevalent issue, disproportionately affects the mental health of young individuals, with marginalized youth bearing a heightened burden. These challenges underscore the need for a nuanced and comprehensive approach to protect the human rights of young people in the digital sphere.

Moreover, the intersectionality of vulnerabilities, where marginalized youth face overlapping challenges such as gender-based discrimination and economic disparities, intensifies the impact of online threats on their well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic strategy, encompassing legal reinforcement, the development of targeted policies, enhancement of digital literacy, and the establishment of effective reporting mechanisms. By doing so, Pakistan can move towards creating a safer and more inclusive digital environment that upholds the human rights of all young individuals.

Government Initiatives Safeguarding Pakistani Youth from Online Threats

The Government of Pakistan has implemented a comprehensive array of initiatives to protect young people from online threats, reflecting a commitment to ensuring a secure digital environment. Central to this effort is the country's cybercrime legislation, which criminalizes online harassment, bullying, and unauthorized access to personal information, providing a legal foundation for prosecuting perpetrators of online threats against the youth.

The National Action Plan for Cyber Security further underscores the government's commitment to a holistic approach, outlining strategies to enhance cyber security across various domains, with specific measures dedicated to protecting young people online. Complementing these legal and strategic frameworks, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 was introduced to combat cybercrimes, the National Response Center for cybercrimes (NR3C) under the Federal Investigation Agency handles cybercrimes investigations, the National Digital Literacy Program has been launched to equip young people with essential skills for navigating the digital landscape safely, emphasizing responsible online behavior and threat awareness.

Public awareness campaigns play a pivotal role in educating young people about online safety measures, empowering them to recognize and report potential threats. The government collaborates actively with social media platforms to enhance safety features and reporting mechanisms, particularly addressing issues like cyberbullying and harmful content targeting young users.

In law enforcement, dedicated child protection units have been established to investigate and respond to cases involving online harm and exploitation against young people. The government has also instituted reporting hotlines and platforms to facilitate swift responses to incidents, enhancing overall safety measures.

Educationally, initiatives to integrate online safety education into school curricula ensure that young people receive formal training on recognizing and mitigating online threats from an early age. Collaborations with non-governmental organizations and civil society groups further enrich the government's multifaceted approach to online safety, contributing to the creation of a digital environment that prioritizes the protection and well-being of Pakistani youth. Through legislative frameworks, strategic planning, educational programs, and collaborative efforts, the government seeks to fortify the digital landscape and foster a secure space for the country's younger generation.

"ANNEXURES"

Figure No.1 Internet connectivity and technological resources in Pakistan. Source: World Education Service.
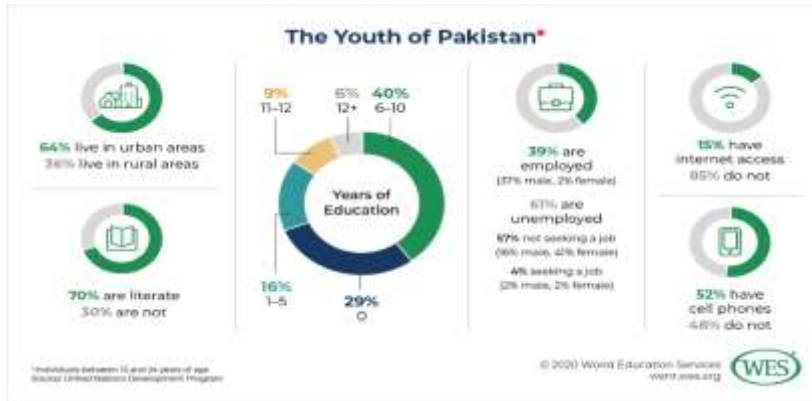

Figure No.2 Out of school rate by education level. Source: UNESCO-UIS, 2021.

The challenges that Pakistani out-of-school children face accessing education Are multi-dimensional, of which some are; inadequate school infrastructure, Demand constraints, no enforcement of compulsory education etc.
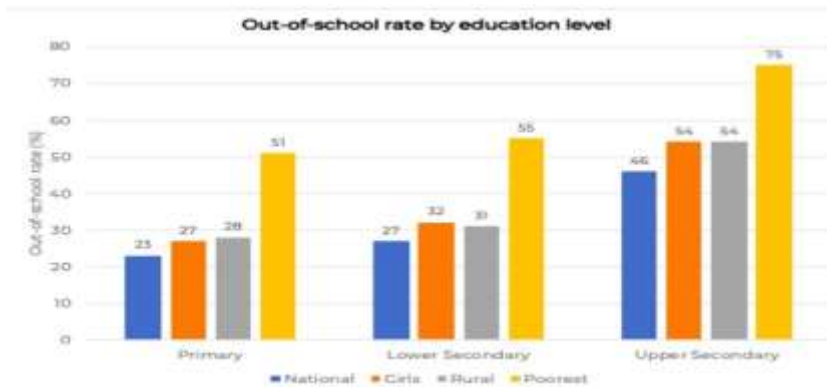

Figure No.3 Completion rate for students enrolled. Source: UNESCO-UIS, 2021.

Girl's challenges in accessing education are multi-faceted. These includes; security issues, shortage of female teachers, social and cultural norms.
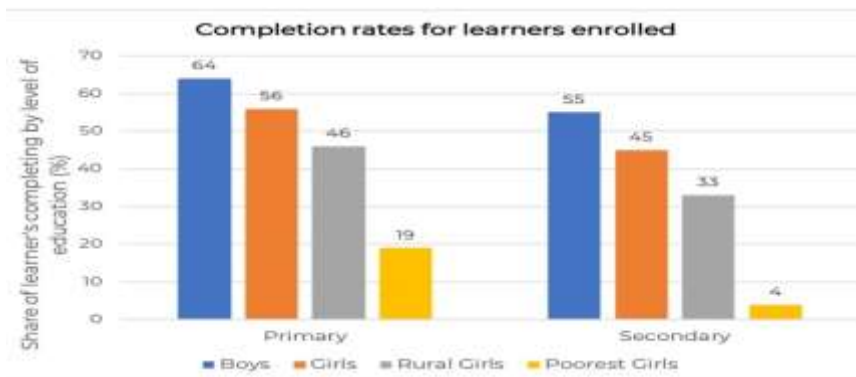
Figure No.4 Access to education by the poorest households. UNESCO- UIS, 2021.

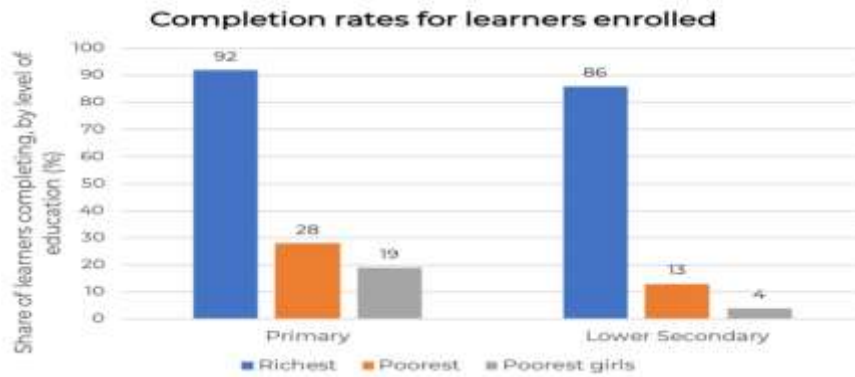Poverty is a strong predictor of whether a child will access education.

Completion rates for learners enrolled

Figure No.5 Literacy skills for effective online learning. UNESCO-UIS, 2021.

Share of learners reaching minimum proficiency in learning by the end of primary education
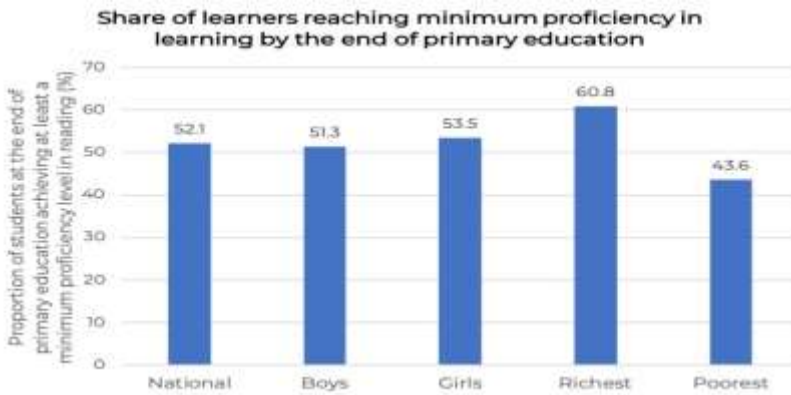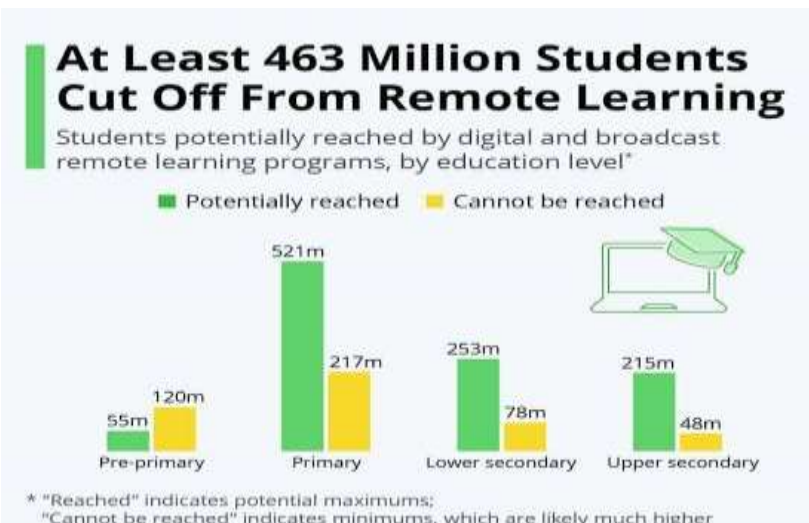
Figure No.6 Government Initiatives to Promote Digital Education Accessibility in Pakistan. Source UNICEF.

At Least 463 Million Students Cut Off From Remote Learning

Students potentially reached by digital and broadcast remote learning programs, by education level*

- Potentially reached
- Cannot be reached

* "Reached" indicates potential maximums; "Cannot be reached" indicates minimums, which are likely much higher

'THE END'