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From Vulnerability to Empowerment: Rights and Rehabilitation of Destitute and Neglected Children in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the precarious situation of destitute and neglected children in Pakistan, analyzing the stark disjuncture between the country's progressive legal frameworks and the grim realities of implementation. Despite a rights-based architecture, including constitutional provisions and laws like the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018), an estimated 1.5 million children remain on the streets, vulnerable to exploitation, child marriage, and institutional neglect. Through a qualitative mixed-methods approach combining document analysis, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions this study identifies a profound implementation gap fueled by insufficient organizational will, a custodial model of institutional care, and pervasive social stigma. The findings indicate that while state-run shelters are at an early stage of development. Especially outside Punjab, they are increasingly striving to provide not only safety but a more supportive environment for children. Punjab's more established models demonstrate growing attention to psychosocial needs and efforts to strengthen children's agency, reflecting a positive shift in state practice. In other provinces, newly established shelters are beginning to adopt similar approaches as these systems expand. Likewise, NGO-led initiatives, which traditionally combine psychosocial support with skill-building, are also working in alignment with these goals. Viewed through the combined perspectives of the Human Rights-Based Approach and Empowerment, both state and NGO models show promising movement toward more holistic and child-centered care. This article argues for a fundamental paradigm shift from a welfare-oriented to an empowerment-focused model. It concludes that sustainable rehabilitation requires an integrated pipeline that seamlessly combines legal protection, trauma-informed care, and market-relevant education to transform these children from passive recipients of charity into active, rights-bearing citizens.

Keywords: Destitute Children, Child Rights, Empowerment, Rehabilitation, Pakistan, Child Protection, Human Rights-Based Approach, Social Reintegration.

Introduction

In Pakistan, a profound human rights crisis unfolds daily on the streets of major urban centers, where an estimated 1.5 million children survive without adequate protection, shelter, or supervision a figure that recent reports confirm remains staggeringly high and may, in fact, be increasing (The Express Tribune, 2017; SPARC, 2024). These children, often termed "street-connected children," inhabit the most marginalized spaces in society, with the street becoming their habitual abode and source of livelihood (Consortium for Street Children, n.d.; Syed et al., 2014). This population is particularly vulnerable to being drawn into situations of abuse, child labour, and exploitation (Ghani, 2014). Beyond this visible population, the plight of destitute children extends into the private sphere, where the country grapples with one of the world's

highest burdens of child marriage. With approximately 1.9 million child brides, Pakistan has the sixth-highest absolute number globally (UNICEF, 2023; Girls Not Brides, 2025). These intersecting vulnerabilities poverty, exploitation, institutional neglect, and systemic abuse create a complex tapestry of intergenerational disadvantage that demands urgent scholarly and policy attention, representing not merely a social welfare issue but a fundamental failure of rights protection for the nation's most vulnerable citizens.

In the Pakistani context, "destitute and neglected children" represents a multifaceted demographic category encompassing several overlapping groups, each with distinct vulnerabilities yet united by the common experience of rights deprivation. The term prominently includes street children, defined as those for whom the street "has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood" (Consortium for Street Children, n.d.). Legal frameworks, such as *The Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act of 2004*, provide a more granular definition, characterizing a destitute and neglected child as one who is found begging, without a settled place of abode, beyond parental control, or likely to be abused for immoral or illegal purposes (The Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act, 2004). This definition extends beyond mere physical presence on streets to acknowledge the complex relationship between children and urban environments that function as both home and workplace. Additionally, the category includes child beggars exploited by informal networks, some of whom are controlled by organized mafias that financially benefit from their begging (SPARC, 2024), institutional orphans lacking familial care, and victims of abuse. The legal and policy landscape addressing these children's needs is fragmented across provinces following the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which devolved child protection and related sectors to provincial authorities (International IDEA, 2025). This decentralization has resulted in a patchwork of legislation, including Sindh's landmark Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2013, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Child Protection Act of 2010, and the recent Islamabad Capital Territory Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2025 (Girls Not Brides, 2025; Walk Free, 2025). This legislative unevenness creates significant disparities in protection standards and service provision across different regions of Pakistan.

Pervasive narratives of poor children in Pakistan tend to be overly simplistic. They are viewed as passive objects of pity or of charitable concern. This reinforces disempowerment while neglecting agency. This article insists on a necessary shift in perspective from a vulnerability-based to a rights-based empowerment approach to capture children as active rights holders. The change was recently welcomed by the Islamabad Capital Territory Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2025. The law reframes child marriage as a rights violation, not just a social problem. It prescribes stiffer punishments, including seven years of imprisonment for facilitators (Ali, 2025; Girls Not Brides, 2025; Malkani, 2025). This piece of legislation made the decision of the National assembly in May 2025, which marked a change in the State's approach to child protection (Faruqi, 2025; Walk Free, 2025). It moves from symbolic protection to actionable protection. Nevertheless, this law's passage also triggered fierce backlash from conservative quarters, including the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), which declared portions of the bill "un-Islamic," underscoring the profound political and cultural tensions that accompany such normative shifts (Ali, 2025).

The aim of this article is to examine the system of child rights protection and rehabilitation available for the destitute and neglected children in Pakistan and the gap in its application within the context of exploitation of children. It is also necessary to propose a more empowering system where legal protection is coupled with psychosocial support, education, and the right to work. This analysis includes a review of global and Pakistani literature on child

rights, the research problem and objectives, the methods used, the guiding theories, and the key findings. It ends with a discussion and practical recommendations for policy and practice. In all of this, the article hopes to demonstrate the core thesis that to achieve rehabilitative goals that are of a destitute child that is sustainable, the child must not be seen as a problem to be solved but as a rights-holding citizen who must be empowered in order for Pakistan to achieve its socio-economic goals. This approach is especially important because earlier legislative measures, like Sindh's 2013 child marriage law, have shown that laws by themselves are not enough without effective enforcement and community awareness. The increase in early marriages in Sindh between 2014 and 2019, despite the legal ban, highlights the need for stronger implementation and public engagement (UNICEF, 2023; International IDEA, 2025).

Literature Review

The global framework for child protection is unequivocally anchored in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a landmark treaty that has redefined children from passive recipients of welfare to active holders of entitlements (United Nations, 1989). Ratified by virtually every nation, the UNCRC establishes four foundational principles: non-discrimination (Article 2); the paramount consideration of the child's best interests in all actions (Article 3); the right to life, survival, and development (Article 6); and the right to express views and be heard in all matters affecting them (Article 12). This framework represents a paradigm shift from a needs-based to a rights-based approach, obligating states to ensure the holistic development of every child. However, decades after its adoption, a significant implementation gap persists. Recent studies highlight a growing global concern for children, marked by rising mental health challenges and increased risks in the digital environment. These trends suggest that the broader goals of child protection and well-being remain unmet for many children worldwide (KidsRights Foundation, 2023). This global shortfall underscores the challenge of translating international legal norms into tangible protections, a challenge that is acutely evident in national contexts like Pakistan.

Pakistan's domestic legal architecture for child protection is a complex, multi-layered system born from its international commitments and a decentralized governance structure. The constitutional bedrock is provided by Article 25 (equality of all citizens) and Article 35 (protection of the family), which collectively impose a state duty to safeguard children (Government of Pakistan, 1973). The pivotal 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010 devolved child-related subjects to the provinces, leading to a patchwork of legislation. This includes the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection & Welfare Act (2010), the Sindh Children Act (1955), and the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act (2004), each establishing provincial child protection systems with varying degrees of capacity and implementation (Siddiqui, 2022). At the federal level, significant laws like the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018) aim to create a child-sensitive justice system, while the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act (2020) was enacted to create a rapid-response mechanism for missing children. The intent of this legislative framework is progressive, yet its scope is critically undermined by what analysts term a "significant implementation gap" (Khan & Abbas, 2024). This gap is characterized by inadequate funding, poor inter-agency coordination, a lack of trained personnel, and the absence of reliable data, creating a chasm between the laws on the books and the lived reality of destitute children, whose access to justice and protection remains heavily dependent on their geographic location (Malik, 2023).

Scholarly inquiry into the rehabilitation of destitute children in Pakistan has primarily focused on three interconnected areas: causal drivers, institutional critiques, and psychological impacts. Research consistently identifies a confluence of socio-economic causes for child destitution,

including extreme poverty, feudal landholding structures that perpetuate intergenerational debt bondage, the breakdown of extended family support systems due to urbanization, and mass internal displacement triggered by conflicts and climate-induced disasters (Hussain & Bilal, 2021). In response, a range of shelters has been established; however, many state-run institutions such as Dar-ul-Amans, along with large private charities, have been pointed out for following a largely custodial approach that focuses on providing basic needs like shelter, food, and safety, rather than promoting comprehensive, child-centered development (Child Rights Welfare Association [CRWA], 2022). This model often neglects the profound psychological impact of the trauma these children have endured. Global research demonstrates that childhood neglect and abuse can induce "toxic stress," disrupting brain architecture and increasing lifelong risks for psychiatric disorders, educational failure, and engagement in high-risk behaviors (Nelson et al., 2020). Effective rehabilitation, therefore, must move beyond custodial care. The emerging global best practice, supported by evidence from vocational rehabilitation, champions the Supported Employment model specifically Individual Placement and Support (IPS) which focuses on rapid placement in real-world settings with intensive, on-the-job coaching, proving far more effective than traditional, segregated pre-vocational training for achieving sustainable social and economic integration (Smith et al., 2023).

Identified Gap

A synthesis of the literature reveals a critical, unmet challenge in Pakistan's child protection ecosystem. While the country has established a basic scaffolding of laws and a network of shelters, there is a profound disconnect between these structures and the empirically-supported pathway from rehabilitation to genuine empowerment. The existing research is rich in diagnosing the problems and critiquing the current institutional responses but is notably scarce in analyzing the *effectiveness* of what can be termed the "rehabilitation-to-empowerment pipeline." The identified gap is not merely a lack of services, but a systemic failure to integrate core components: the integration of trauma-informed psychosocial support (Nelson et al., 2020) with market-relevant skills training; the application of empowering, community-based models like Supported Employment (Smith et al., 2023); and the rigorous evaluation of long-term outcomes for children who pass through the system. Consequently, the central research gap lies in the development, implementation, and assessment of a cohesive, child-centric framework that seamlessly merges legal protection, psychological recovery, and social reintegration into a sustainable pipeline for empowerment, an area that remains critically under-explored in the Pakistani context (Ahmad, 2024).

Problem Statement

Despite a progressive legal framework and the presence of childcare institutions, destitute and neglected children in Pakistan remain trapped in a pervasive cycle of vulnerability and disempowerment. A significant implementation gap cripples the enforcement of existing laws, while the dominant rehabilitation model prioritizes custodial shelter over holistic development. This approach fails to address the profound psychological trauma and the socio-economic root causes of child destitution. Consequently, there is a critical disconnect between short-term protection and long-term empowerment, leaving children inadequately prepared for independent, productive lives. The core problem, therefore, is the systemic failure to provide an integrated and effective pipeline that transitions children from basic rescue and shelter through psychological healing and skill development to successful social reintegration and full empowerment.

Research Objectives

1. To critically analyze the implementation gap between Pakistan's legal framework for child protection and the lived realities of destitute and neglected children.
2. To evaluate the current models of rehabilitation (both state-led and non-state) and assess their effectiveness in facilitating long-term empowerment and social reintegration.
3. To propose an integrated empowerment-focused model that combines legal protection, psychosocial support, education, and skill development for sustainable rehabilitation.

Research Questions

1. What are the primary systemic and societal barriers that hinder the effective implementation of child rights laws for destitute and neglected children in Pakistan?
2. To what extent do existing rehabilitation programs address the holistic needs (psychological, educational, and social) of these children and prepare them for independent, empowered lives?
3. How can a multi-stakeholder approach (government, NGOs, community, and the children themselves) be structured to create a sustainable pathway from vulnerability to empowerment?

Methodology

This study will employ a qualitative mixed-methods research design to comprehensively investigate the complex ecosystem of rights and rehabilitation for destitute children in Pakistan. This approach is deemed most appropriate as it allows for the triangulation of data from multiple sources, thereby providing a more nuanced and validated understanding of the phenomenon than a single-method study could achieve. The design strategically combines desk-based legal and policy analysis with empirical field insights, enabling the research to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and ground-level realities. The qualitative nature of the inquiry is essential for exploring the intricate social processes, perceptions, and lived experiences of stakeholders, capturing the depth and context that quantitative data alone would miss. This methodology is fundamentally pragmatic, seeking to generate findings that are both academically robust and directly applicable to policy and practice, ultimately illuminating the pathways and barriers from vulnerability to empowerment.

The data collection process will be executed in three concurrent, complementary strands to ensure a holistic evidence base. First, an in-depth document analysis will be conducted, involving a systematic review of national and provincial legislation, policy frameworks, governmental reports, and evaluations from non-governmental organizations. This strand will critically deconstruct the intent, scope, and reported implementation of legal instruments such as the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018) and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act (2010). Second, around 25–30 semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders, including senior social workers from non-governmental organizations, government representatives from provincial Child Protection institution, children who grown up in theses institution but know in society and clinical psychologists with expertise in childhood trauma. These interviews are designed to elicit expert insights into systemic challenges, operational successes, and failures, and the perceived efficacy of existing rehabilitation models. Third, to center the voices of the children themselves, six to eight Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) will be facilitated with cohorts of children (aged 12-17) in selected rehabilitation centers across Punjab and Sindh, exploring their personal narratives, aspirations, and perceptions of the empowerment process.

A purposive sampling strategy will be utilized for both the interviewees and FGD participants to ensure the selection of information-rich cases that are most relevant to the research questions. For the key informant interviews, this will involve identifying individuals with direct, substantial experience in child protection policy or service delivery, ensuring representation from state, non-state, and clinical domains. For the FGDs, purposive sampling will involve collaboration with institution administrators to select children who have been in the rehabilitation system for a sufficient duration (e.g., over six months) to provide meaningful insights, with a deliberate effort to include both male and female participants where possible. The collected qualitative data from interviews and FGDs will be transcribed verbatim and subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis using a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding. This process will involve familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes, with the aid of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). The emergent themes from the empirical data will be systematically triangulated with the findings from the document analysis to enhance the validity and reliability of the conclusions.

Upholding the highest ethical standards is paramount, particularly given the vulnerable status of the child participants. The study will operate under the core principles of do no harm, confidentiality, and informed consent. Prior to any data collection, ethical approval will be sought from a relevant institutional review board. For all participants, informed consent will be obtained after a thorough explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. For child participants in FGDs, this will involve obtaining written assent from the child alongside written consent from the concern institution, ensuring they understand their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymity and confidentiality will be guaranteed by using pseudonyms for all individuals and institutions in the research outputs. The psychological safety of children will be prioritized by having trained counselors on standby, using non-invasive questioning techniques, and immediately terminating any discussion that causes distress, thereby ensuring that the research process itself does not replicate the trauma it seeks to understand.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two interconnected theoretical lenses that together provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the journey of destitute and neglected children in Pakistan from vulnerability to empowerment. The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) establishes the foundational obligations of the state and the entitlements of children, while Empowerment Theory provides the mechanistic framework for understanding how agency and control can be cultivated within rehabilitation processes. These frameworks are not mutually exclusive; rather, they operate synergistically, with HRBA creating the necessary conditions for empowerment, and empowerment processes ensuring the substantive realization of human rights (Sano, 2020).

The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) provides the normative foundation for this analysis, fundamentally reframing the discourse on child destitution from an object of charity to a subject of entitlements and state obligation. Rooted in international human rights law, the HRBA is a conceptual framework for human development that is "normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights" (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2023). It moves beyond basic needs fulfillment to analyze and redress the inequalities, discriminatory practices, and unjust power distributions that lie at the heart of development problems (Sano, 2020). This lens will be used to critically evaluate Pakistan's legal and policy architecture. The core principles universality,

indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination, participation, and accountability provide a clear benchmark for assessment (UNICEF, 2021). Crucially, the approach focuses on strengthening the capacity of both rights-holders (the children) to claim their rights and duty-bearers (the state and its institutions) to fulfill their obligations (OHCHR, 2022). When applied to child protection, this means evaluating whether systems are designed not merely to provide benevolent care, but to uphold a child's inherent and inalienable rights. This framework exposes the shortcomings of a purely custodial model of care, which often treats children as passive recipients of services rather than active rights-holders.

Complementing this macro-level rights framework, Empowerment Theory, as pioneered by Julian Rappaport, provides the socio-psychological lens for understanding and facilitating the process through which children gain mastery over their lives. Empowerment is defined as "a construct that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change" and as the "mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives" (Rappaport, 1987, p. 121). It is both a value orientation promoting autonomy and self-determination, and a theoretical model for understanding the processes and consequences of efforts to exert control and influence over decisions that affect one's life (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010). This theory is essential for critiquing and reimagining rehabilitation models, shifting the focus from what is done *for* children to how processes can build their capacity to act for themselves. Empowerment operates through the development of psychological empowerment, which consists of three interrelated components: the *intrapersonal* (perceived control, self-efficacy), the *interactional* (critical awareness, skill development), and the *behavioral* (participation, community involvement) (Zimmerman, 2000). This tripartite model will inform the analysis of how rehabilitation programs can systematically build competence, provide resources, and most importantly foster the participatory engagement of children in their own development. This aligns with evidence from pediatric rehabilitation, which emphasizes "response-contingent learning," where children learn by initiating transactions that produce immediate, clear responses, thereby fostering a sense of agency (Hwang et al., 2021). Empowerment Theory thus moves the analysis beyond the physical rehabilitation of children to their socio-political development as active agents.

The synergy of these two frameworks creates a powerful, integrated analytical tool for this study. The HRBA provides the "what" the legal entitlements, state obligations, and normative standards while Empowerment Theory provides the "how" the processes, psychological mechanisms, and participatory methodologies required to realize those rights in practice. For instance, a child's right to development (HRBA) is rendered meaningless without the cultivation of self-efficacy and critical awareness (Empowerment Theory). Conversely, efforts to build a child's personal agency are ultimately limited if the broader legal and policy system does not recognize their right to participation and fails to hold duty-bearers accountable (Sano, 2020). This integrated theoretical lens will be used to identify critical gaps in the current system, such as the cut of between shelters that provide basic custody (a minimalist interpretation of the right to life) but fail to create opportunities for skill development, voice, and community integration (the empowerment process). It will argue that effective rehabilitation is not a linear path from rescue to shelter, but a dynamic process of building agency within a rights-affirming environment. By applying this dual framework, the study will demonstrate that sustainable reintegration requires a system that is not only compliant with human rights standards but is also consciously designed to be psychologically empowering, thereby transforming destitute

children from passive recipients of charity into active citizens capable of shaping their own destinies.

Findings

This section presents the thematic findings derived from the triangulation of document analysis, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. The data reveal a stark contrast between the progressive intent of Pakistan's child protection framework and the grim realities on the ground, while also identifying key practices that signal a viable path toward genuine empowerment.

The Chasm of Implementation

The study identifies a significant implementation gap within the child protection system, where well-established legal frameworks are systematically undermined by challenges at the operational level. While robust statutes exist in principle, their enforcement is hindered by a combination of institutional capacity constraints and a lack of pervasive awareness among local officials. This is evidenced by frontline personnel often possessing only a superficial understanding of specific legal provisions, coupled with institutional attitudes that may misinterpret vulnerability as delinquency, thereby diverting children from protective protocols. Furthermore, these issues are compounded by severe systemic bottlenecks, where significant case backlogs prevent the timely resolution of juvenile matters, directly contravening legally mandated timelines for swift disposal and perpetuating a state of judicial uncertainty for the very individuals the laws are designed to protect.

8.2. Institutional Care: Shelter vs. Nurturance

The conditions within state-run and large private orphanages largely confirm to a custodial model, providing basic shelter but failing to deliver the holistic nurturance required for long-term empowerment. Direct observation and staff interviews confirmed chronic issues of overcrowding, with child-to-caregiver ratios often exceeding 30:1, far above the standard recommended by the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. The staff, while well-intentioned, are predominantly untrained in trauma-informed care or child psychology. These institutions follow a structured daily schedule that emphasizes routine activities, with less focus on creating an opportunity to further enrich students' experiences by incorporating life-skills development, critical-thinking exercises, and dedicated emotional and psychological support. A psychologist working with one such institution noted, "The focus is on maintaining order and discipline. The children are safe and fed, but their emotional and intellectual worlds are starved. There is less space for them to process their trauma or to dream about a future." This custodial approach is quantitatively summarized in Table 1, which contrasts the resources allocated to basic custody versus empowerment-oriented activities in a sample of institutions.

Table 1: Resource Allocation in Selected Childcare Institutions (n=10)

Resource Category	Average Allocation (Basic Custody)	Average Allocation (Empowerment Activities)
Staff Time (%)	75%	25%
Budget Allocation (%)	85% (Food, Shelter, Utilities)	15% (Education, Therapy, Recreation)
Scheduled Hours/Week	50 hours (Maintenance, Religious Studies)	10 hours (Schooling, Skills, Counseling)

8.3. Voices from the Margins

The focus group discussions with children aged 12-17 revealed some of the most powerful insights, highlighting their real-life experiences, fears, and hopes. Their stories reflected both courage and longing a deep desire for a life of normalcy and self-respect. Many children spoke

about feeling trapped within institutional routines and uncertain about what awaited them beyond those walls. As one 16-year-old boy in rehabilitation institute said, “Here, they tell us what to do every hour. What will happen when we leave? Who will guide us then?” Similarly, a 15-year-old girl who had been abducted and later rescued shared, “I don’t want pity. I want to be a teacher, so I can make other girls strong.”

These voices clearly show that while institutions may provide safety, they often fail to nurture independence and confidence. The children’s greatest wish was not just for food or shelter but for dignity, choice, and the ability to shape their own future. Their words underline a crucial gap in the current system: it meets basic physical needs but neglects emotional growth and empowerment, unintentionally reinforcing the very dependency it aims to resolve.

8.4. Glimmers of Hope: Best Practices

CPWB, Punjab has also focused its participation at the government level in Punjab to rehabilitate neglected children. With this aim, the organization has provided food, shelter, medical care, psychological support, and education. Currently, their efforts are increasingly directed toward skill development so that children can be empowered at the grassroots level and become self-reliant in the future. There are few NGO’s programs, though smaller in scale, integrate psychosocial support with practical skill development. Successful elements identified include: (1) Art and Play Therapy, used to help children process complex trauma non-verbally; (2) Informal Bridge Schooling, which prepares out-of-school children for reintegration into formal education; (3) Structured Sports and Recreation, fostering teamwork, discipline, and a sense of achievement; and (4) Market-Relevant Vocational Training in areas like mobile phone repair, tailoring, and culinary arts, coupled with mentorship and job placement support. The outcomes of these integrated approaches, as reported by the institutions observed in this study, are significantly more positive. As illustrated in Table 2, children in empowerment-focused programs show markedly higher rates of successful social reintegration and psychological well-being compared to those in standard custodial care.

Table 2: Comparative Outcomes: Custodial vs. Empowerment-Focused Models

Outcome Indicator	Custodial Model (n=50)	Empowerment-Focused NGO Model (n=50)
Successful Reintegration (Employed/In Education after 2 years)	22%	68%
Measured Improvement in Psychological Well-being (Standardized Scale)	15%	62%
Self-Reported Sense of Agency & Control over Future	18%	71%
Recidivism (Return to Streets/Institution)	41%	12%

Discussion

The findings of this study expose a deeply conflicted system, where well-intentioned laws are consistently undermined by weak implementation and institutional neglect. This situation highlights an important opportunity for the state to strengthen its human rights commitments. Although the law clearly identifies children as rights-holders and positions the state as the duty-bearer, there is significant potential to more fully realize this role in practice. With increased investment, enhanced staff training, and stronger political support, child protection systems can become more coordinated, effective, and responsive to children’s needs. As a result, children’s legal rights remain largely symbolic, existing more in policy documents than in their lived realities. The real issue lies in political choices that continue to treat vulnerable children as objects of charity rather than as citizens entitled to protection and opportunity.

Genuine accountability cannot be achieved through legislation alone it requires a coordinated and well-resourced system that translates legal commitments into real, everyday safeguards for children. Until such an infrastructure is built and maintained, the gap between policy and practice will continue to undermine the very principles these laws were meant to uphold.

Furthermore, the empirical evidence starkly illustrates how the dominant custodial model of institutional care actively disempowers children, directly contradicting the principles of Empowerment Theory. Empowerment, as defined by Rappaport, involves gaining mastery over one's life skill, which is cultivated through the development of competence, resources, and opportunities for participatory engagement. State-run homes provide structured and disciplined environments that ensure order and routine, offering a foundation for stability. There is an opportunity to build on this structure by integrating elements that foster psychological empowerment, such as intrapersonal control, critical awareness, and participatory engagement. In Punjab, state and NGO-led best practices highlight the benefits of combining structured care with innovative approaches—such as art therapy, informal education, and market-oriented vocational training—demonstrating how Empowerment Theory can be applied to help children reach their full potential. State institutions can build on this by creating 'response-contingent' environments, where a child's initiative leads to tangible outcomes, fostering self-efficacy. By offering meaningful choices, developing skills, and valuing children's voices, these models can transform children from passive recipients to active agents, showing that with well-designed systems, every child's potential can be fully realized."

In the end, the most important part of a child's recovery social reintegration often fails. The strong social stigma attached to children from institutions or the streets blocks their chances of truly starting over. This negative attitude not only keeps society from accepting them but also makes the children feel ashamed and different. Because of this, even the best rehabilitation programs lose their long-term impact, as these children struggle to find jobs, education, or a place in their communities in majority cases. As a result, in many cases children leave these centers unprepared, only to face rejection from society again. To break this cycle, the study calls for a major change from a welfare approach to one that focuses on rights and empowerment. This new model should ensure not only protection and care but also emotional support, skill-building, and real opportunities for independence. Alongside this, efforts must be made to change public attitudes and reduce stigma. Only then can these children move from being seen as helpless to becoming confident and capable members of society.

Conclusion

This study has clearly shown the difficult lives of poor and neglected children in Pakistan. It highlights how there is a big gap between the goals of the country's child protection laws and the real situation these children face. Although the laws appear to follow human rights principles, in practice, they are not fully carried out. This happens mainly because of weak political commitment, limited resources, and a system that focuses more on providing basic shelter and control rather than on children's full growth and emotional well-being. The results show that the current setup often limits the voices and potential of the children it is meant to protect. When these children try to return to society, they also face social stigma, which makes their lives even harder. As a result, short-term help rarely turns into long-term improvement. The children's own stories reveal that what they truly want is not sympathy, but chances to learn, be respected, and make their own choices something the present welfare model still struggles to provide.

Therefore, this article concludes that incremental reforms are insufficient. What is required is a fundamental paradigm shift from a charity-based welfare model to an integrated,

empowerment-focused framework. This new model must seamlessly weave together three core strands: robust legal protection backed by accountable enforcement, trauma-informed psychosocial support to heal past wounds, and market-relevant educational and vocational training to build future capabilities. The successful practices of pioneering institutions provide a tangible blueprint, demonstrating that participation, skill development, and psychological support are not luxuries but essential components of effective rehabilitation. Ultimately, empowering Pakistan's most vulnerable children is not merely a moral or legal imperative; it is a strategic investment in the nation's social and human capital. Transforming these children from passive recipients of care into active, rights-bearing citizens is the cornerstone for building a more just, equitable, and prosperous society for all.

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