

Leadership for bully-free primary schools: A comparative study of Urban and Rural Larkana

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Abstract

School-based bullying has emerged as a critical public health and educational crisis worldwide, with Pakistan exhibiting significantly higher prevalence rates than global averages. This review paper critically examines the multifaceted challenges of establishing bully-free primary schools in Larkana District, Sindh, through a comparative analysis of urban and rural contexts. Drawing upon Johan Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence, the paper systematically analyzes the direct, structural, and cultural mechanisms that perpetuate peer victimization in educational institutions. The review synthesizes evidence from national health surveys, regional psychological studies, and institutional reports to demonstrate that bullying in Larkana manifests differently across geographical contexts rural areas exhibit higher rates of physical aggression and poly-victimization (23% higher than urban counterparts), while urban settings face rising challenges of relational exclusion and cyber-harassment. The paper critically evaluates the effectiveness of existing regulatory frameworks, particularly the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2016, and identifies significant implementation gaps characterized by reactive governance, administrative overload, and institutional retaliation against whistleblowers. Leadership styles emerge as a pivotal factor, with democratic and transformational approaches demonstrating superior outcomes in creating inclusive school environments compared to autocratic models. The review concludes that sustainable bullying prevention requires a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach integrating infrastructure improvements, context-specific leadership training through programs like SELECT, active enforcement of child protection mechanisms, and community engagement to address deep-seated socio-cultural norms that normalize violence.

Keywords: School bullying, structural violence, primary education, leadership styles, child protection, urban-rural disparities, Larkana, Pakistan

1. Introduction

School-based bullying and peer victimization have transitioned from being dismissed as localized behavioral issues to being recognized as severe public health and educational crises worldwide. Bullying is defined as unwanted, repetitive, and aggressive behaviors characterized by a systemic power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. Despite its debilitating psychological, emotional, and social consequences, peer aggression has historically been normalized across many societies as a "rite of passage" or a mechanism for developing

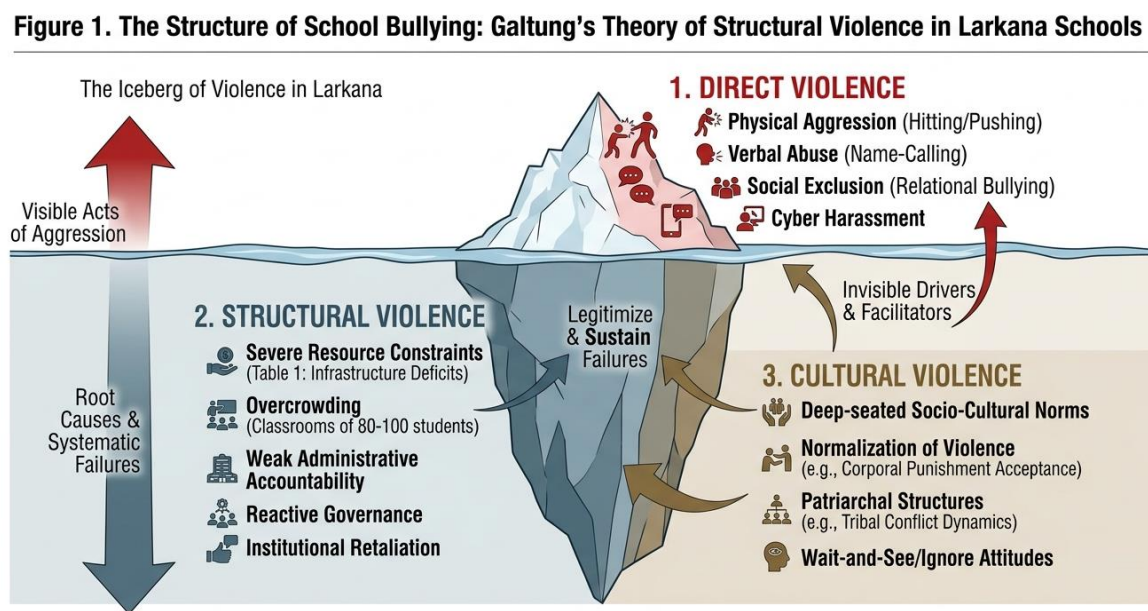
childhood resilience (González et al., 2022).

In Pakistan, the scale of this problem is particularly pronounced. National school-based health surveys indicate a baseline bullying prevalence of approximately 41% among school-aged children, which significantly exceeds the global average of 33% to 35% (Peguero & Hong, 2020). This phenomenon is deeply embedded within the institutional structures of the educational system, with public sector schools reporting a victimization rate of 54%, compared to 46% in private institutions. Within this national landscape, the province of Sindh exhibits some of the highest rates of primary-level bullying, with verbal abuse, name-calling, and physical harassment serving as pervasive features of the daily school experience (Jones et al., 2008).

To systematically analyze the structural, cultural, and direct mechanisms that sustain bullying in educational institutions, researchers utilize Johan Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence. Direct violence, such as physical hitting, verbal teasing, and relational exclusion, represents only the visible tip of the iceberg. This direct violence is underpinned and legitimized by structural violence such as severe resource constraints, dilapidated environments, class and gender discrimination, and weak administrative accountability and cultural violence, which includes societal patriarchal norms, the glorification of dominant behaviors, and the traditional acceptance of physical punishment (Hershel, 2020).

In Larkana District, situated in northern Sindh, school leadership operates at the intersection of these complex socio-cultural and administrative dynamics. Addressing the challenge of creating bully-free primary schools requires a comprehensive understanding of how geographical disparities, resource limitations, and local power structures shape the administrative capacity of school heads (Kalhor et al., 2020).

Figure 1. The Structure of School Bullying: Galtung's Theory of Structural Violence in Larkana Schools



2. Socio-Psychological Realities and Mental Health Burden in Larkana

The psychological consequences of peer victimization are profound, persistent, and multi-dimensional. Victims of traditional and cyberbullying frequently suffer from elevated rates of depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, psychosomatic ailments, and severe academic decline

(UNESCO, 2019). To understand these effects within the specific local context of Larkana, researchers have examined the mental health burden of bullying in regional academic institutions (Memon et al., 2023).

A landmark cross-sectional study conducted at the Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Medical University (SMBBMU) and Chandka Medical College in Larkana utilized a stratified random sample of 372 valid responses to analyze the relationships between bullying, social support, subjective happiness, and psychological distress. By employing standardized psychological instruments including the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS), the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS), and the F-SozU Social Support Scale, the study revealed a high burden of psychological distress (Kliem et al., 2015). Bullied students exhibited significantly higher scores for depression, anxiety, and stress ($p < .001$) and were far more likely to report low levels of happiness, inadequate social support, and severe suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019).

This localized research highlights that the trauma of peer victimization in Larkana is not a temporary phase, but rather a severe psychological stressor that compromises students' cognitive development and overall well-being. Furthermore, a strong "bully-victim" feedback loop exists within the region (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Powerless children who absorb systematic physical or psychological cruelty in silence often adopt aggressive dominance strategies later in life. This behavioral oscillation between helplessness and aggression eventually manifests as adult workplace harassment, domestic violence, and highly authoritarian parenting styles, entrenching a cyclical culture of violence across generations (Moore et al., 2017).

3. Systemic Realities of Primary Education in Larkana

Primary schools in Larkana operate within a highly constrained and socio-politically complex administrative landscape. These systemic limitations directly affect classroom dynamics and restrict the capacity of school leaders to monitor and intervene in bullying incidents (Kowalski et al., 2014).

3.1 Infrastructure Deprivation and Spatial Vulnerability

A primary structural challenge in Larkana is the severe state of school infrastructure. Investigations by the Sindh Human Rights Commission (SHRC), led by Chairperson Iqbal Ahmed Detho, have documented the dilapidated condition of primary schools across the district. In several rural areas including government schools in Mahota village, Jatt Bhutta, Sallar Bhutta, and Nazar Detho village students are forced to learn in buildings that lack electricity, clean drinking water, separate functional washrooms, and boundary walls (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). In rural Wakro village, the government primary school building was declared non-functional due to structural instability, forcing children to sit under trees for their lessons. This physical vulnerability directly facilitates bullying. Peer victimization typically peaks in areas with limited adult supervision, such as broken corridors, unlit restrooms, and open spaces surrounding unfenced school compounds (Holt et al., 2015).

3.2 Overcrowding and Attrition Dynamics

In urban centers, schools face extreme overcrowding. Classrooms regularly accommodate between 80 to 100 students per teacher, creating chaotic learning environments where teachers are unable to supervise student behavior or detect subtle forms of social exclusion. This structural environment is a key driver of student dropouts. A qualitative study conducted across four towns in Larkana District utilized purposive sampling of taluka education officers, district administrative staff, students, and parents to analyze primary school attrition. The findings

revealed that structural deprivation, combined with deep-seated institutional challenges, directly accelerates student dropouts (Arseneault, 2018).

Table 1: Systemic Determinants of Primary Student Attrition and School Vulnerability in Larkana

Institutional Factor	Socio-Political Manifestation in Larkana	Direct Link to Bullying and Vulnerability
Poverty & Child Labor	Over 52% of families live below the poverty line, forcing children into agricultural or informal work.	Poorer students face severe class discrimination and economic bullying from wealthier peers.
Tribal Conflict & Feudalism	Feudal structures provoke frequent tribal disputes, causing schools to shut down for extended periods.	Aggression and dominance are normalized as community-level survival strategies.
Infrastructure Deficits	Missing boundary walls, lack of electricity, and non-functional classrooms.	Unsupervised, isolated school spaces become high-risk zones for physical victimization.
Political Interference	Teacher recruitments, choices of postings, and school budgets are heavily influenced by local political elites.	Weakens administrative authority, encourages absenteeism, and undermines accountability.
Informal Social Norms	Cultural values isolate and restrict girls, often confining them to homes after early primary grades.	Girls are highly vulnerable to relational exclusion and gender-based harassment.

4. Comparative Dynamics of School Bullying: Urban vs. Rural Larkana

The nature, frequency, and administrative response to primary school bullying are heavily shaped by geographical and structural differences between urban and rural Larkana. While both environments report high rates of peer victimization, the specific forms of aggression and the coping mechanisms employed by school heads differ significantly (Copeland et al., 2013).

4.1 Physical and Poly-Bullying in Rural Larkana

In rural primary schools, bullying is characterized by direct physical aggression and high rates of poly-victimization, where a single student is subjected to multiple forms of abuse. Quantitative studies indicate that rural adolescents face a 14% higher rate of general bullying and a 23% higher rate of poly-bullying compared to their urban counterparts (Cao et al., 2025). This elevated risk is driven by several factors:

- **Socio-Economic Deprivation:** The high concentration of poverty in rural Larkana exposes children from lower socio-economic backgrounds to systematic class-based teasing and physical intimidation.
- **Normalization of Physical Aggression:** The proximity to local tribal feuds and the widespread acceptance of physical force in rural homes normalize physical violence as an acceptable means of establishing social status.
- **Weak Legal and Social Protections:** Rural children have almost no access to child legal protection agencies, psychological counseling services, or formal anti-bullying reporting channels.

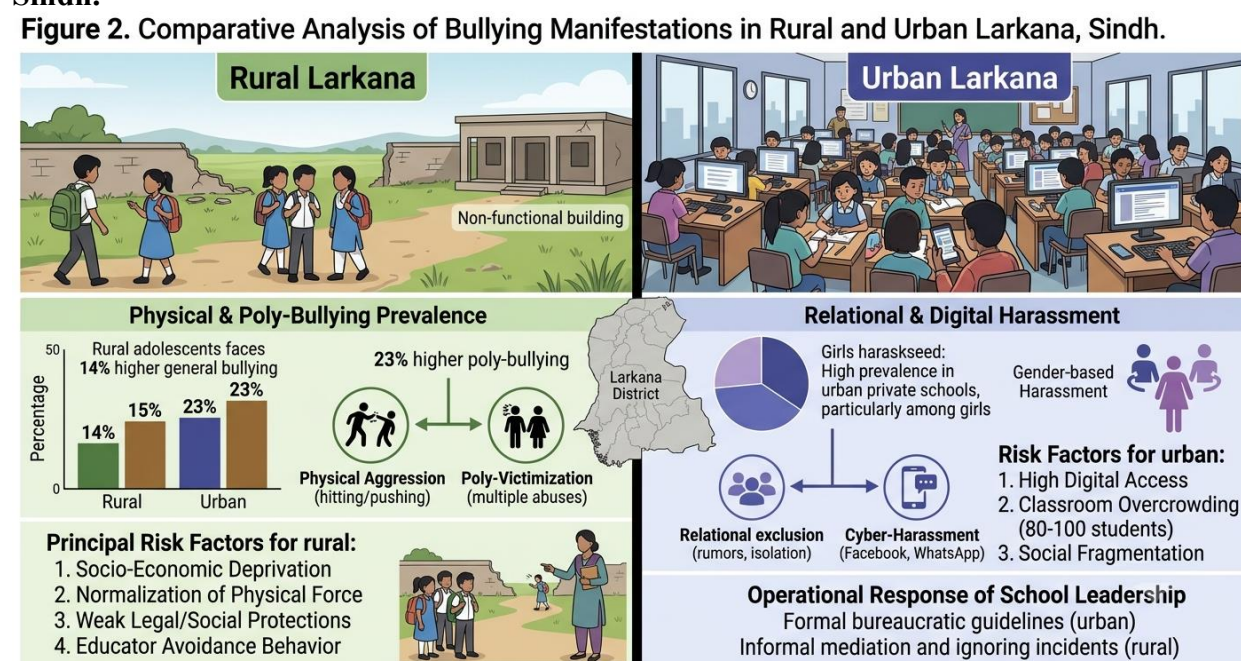
- **Avoidance Behavior by Educators:** Teachers in rural areas are highly likely to ignore, avoid, or downplay bullying incidents, viewing physical altercations as typical childhood behavior or fearing involvement in complex tribal dynamics (Savahl et al., 2024).

4.2 Relational and Digital Harassment in Urban Larkana

Urban primary schools present a contrasting behavioral profile. Although physical bullying occurs, urban settings exhibit a higher prevalence of relational, emotional, and digital victimization. Relational bullying, which is often difficult for teachers to detect, involves spreading malicious rumors, exclusionary physical gestures, and organized social isolation. This form of bullying is highly prevalent in urban private schools, particularly among girls (Cabrera et al., 2024).

Furthermore, digital connectivity has facilitated the rapid growth of cyberbullying in urban areas. Using platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, urban students engage in cyber-harassment, online intimidation, and the sharing of humiliating content. The transition to home-based online learning in recent years has further expanded the reach of bullies, allowing harassment to bypass school boundaries and target victims in their homes (Cantone et al., 2015).

Figure 2. Comparative Analysis of Bullying Manifestations in Rural and Urban Larkana, Sindh.



Sources: Data visualization based on Cao et al. (2025), Cabrera et al. (2024), and regional reports.

Table 2: Regional Disparities in Bullying Profiles and Institutional Dynamics

Geographical Dimension	Dominant Bullying Modalities	Principal Risk Factors	Operational Response of School Leadership
Urban Larkana	Relational exclusion, psychological teasing, and cyberbullying via social media.	High digital access, classroom overcrowding, and social fragmentation.	Relies on formal administrative guidelines, though often delayed by bureaucratic inertia.

Rural Larkana	Direct physical violence, resource snatching, and poly-victimization.	Extreme poverty, tribal conflicts, lack of boundary walls, and high teacher absenteeism.	Relies on informal mediation, though often characterized by ignoring or avoiding incidents.
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5. Leadership Styles and Teacher Effectiveness in Larkana

The school headmaster or headmistress plays a critical role in establishing the school's social environment and shaping teachers' and students' responses to bullying. In Sindh, school heads typically adopt one of three primary leadership styles, with varying levels of effectiveness in preventing peer victimization (Shah et al., 2024).

5.1 Autocratic Leadership and the Culture of Fear

Autocratic or authoritarian leadership is characterized by highly centralized decision-making, a strict reliance on top-down commands, and the use of rewards and punishments. School heads using this style focus heavily on maintaining absolute discipline through punitive sanctions. This style is highly prevalent in public schools and Urdu-medium government institutions in Sindh (Marwat, 2021).

While autocratic methods can force immediate behavioral compliance, they are ineffective for long-term moral internalization or behavioral change. Autocratic leadership negatively impacts teacher motivation, limits professional autonomy, and creates a school climate defined by fear. Under this style, students are highly discouraged from reporting bullying, as they fear they will be punished, labeled as "snitches," or met with administrative indifference (Riaz et al., 2023).

5.2 Democratic and Transformational Leadership

Democratic and transformational leadership styles offer much more effective approaches to reducing school bullying. Democratic leaders prioritize collaborative decision-making, encourage open dialogue, and seek input from teachers, parents, and students. This participatory approach builds a highly inclusive school environment, increases teacher commitment, and establishes clear, shared norms regarding student safety and behavioral expectations (Iqbal, 2017).

Transformational leadership focuses on setting a clear institutional vision, motivating staff, and fostering continuous professional growth. A study involving 300 school teachers in Larkana demonstrated that transformational and democratic leadership styles contribute significantly to teacher effectiveness and motivation. By providing vision, encouragement, and professional development, transformational school heads encourage teachers to proactively address classroom bullying.

5.3 Seniority-Based Appointments and Administrative Overload

Despite the proven benefits of transformational leadership, the provincial education system in Sindh is constrained by systemic administrative practices. Teachers are regularly appointed to headship positions based strictly on their years of service rather than their professional qualifications or leadership capabilities. Consequently, many school heads are unfamiliar with modern instructional leadership or positive behavioral intervention strategies (Ali & Rizvi, 2007).

Furthermore, headteachers are heavily burdened by administrative tasks. Rather than acting as instructional leaders, they must spend their time coordinating co-curricular sports, organizing cultural celebrations, managing school cleanliness, and compiling urgent enrollment data requested by provincial administrators. This administrative overload leaves school heads with

very little time to design, implement, or monitor anti-bullying programs (Akram et al., 2025).

6. Regulatory Frameworks and Policy Implementation Bottlenecks

The province of Sindh has enacted progressive legislation to protect children from violence and harassment in educational settings. However, translating these laws into daily school practices remains a significant challenge (Naeem, 2014).

6.1 The Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2016

To eliminate physical abuse in schools, the provincial assembly passed the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2016. The Act explicitly bans all forms of physical violence, mental abuse, and humiliating treatment of children in public, private, and religious educational settings, taking precedence over Section 89 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which historically permitted "reasonable punishment" in good faith (Holden & Ashraf, 2015).

Table 3: Regulatory Provisions of the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2016

Statutory Dimension	Legislative Provision and Mandate	Operational Penalties for Violations
Section 3: Prohibition	Banning of all physical force, psychological abuse, and humiliating treatment in public, private, and religious schools.	Liable to standard criminal penalties under the Pakistan Penal Code.
Section 4: Minor Penalties	Administrative sanctions against school personnel who violate child protection and dignity standards.	Official censure, and the temporary withholding of professional promotions or salary increments.
Section 4: Major Penalties	Strict disciplinary actions for severe violations of child safety and physical integrity.	Compulsory demotion to lower scales, removal from service, or permanent dismissal.
2021 Implementation Rules	Mandatory establishment of a three-member Child Protection Committee (CPC) in every school.	Compulsory referral of abuse cases to district police or child helpline authorities (1121).

Under the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Rules 2021, each school must establish a Child Protection Committee (CPC) consisting of the head of the institution, a regulatory department representative, and a parent or guardian. The CPC is legally mandated to receive, record, and investigate complaints of physical abuse or bullying, and must complete its investigation and issue a decision within 15 days (Shahidullah, 2017).

6.2 Reactive Governance and Implementation Gaps

Despite this robust regulatory framework, implementation in Larkana and the wider Sindh province is often weak and inconsistent. Disciplinary actions taken by educational authorities are primarily reactive and transactional, occurring only after severe cases attract public or media attention (Zia & Hassan, 2023).

For example, formal orders from the Director of School Education (Primary) Larkano, Khalil Ahmed Mahar, demonstrate that the administration relies on case-by-case sanctions rather than systemic enforcement. In 2025, a minor penalty of "withholding of one annual increment" was

imposed on Primary School Teacher (PST) Abdul Hameed Korkani at GBPS Noor Muhammad Korkani in Taluka Larkana for established misconduct. Similar minor sanctions were applied to Headmistress Amina Khatoon in Kashmore Taluka (Balakrishnan, 2022). While major penalties are occasionally handed down such as the sanction imposed on PST Nadeem Ahmed Soomro at GBPS Channa Muhalla in Naseerabad these isolated administrative actions have not established a safe, supportive, and systemic anti-bullying culture across the province's primary schools (González et al., 2022).

7. Institutional Retaliation and Whistleblower Vulnerability in Larkana

The challenges of implementing child protection laws are further complicated by systemic resistance and a lack of accountability within the local educational bureaucracy. This environment often leaves both students and teachers vulnerable to administrative retaliation when they attempt to report harassment, abuse, or bullying (Jones et al., 2008).

8. Restorative Pathways: The SELECT Project and CPD Framework

To address these deep-seated systemic challenges and support school heads in creating safe environments, the Government of Sindh has partnered with international development organizations to implement comprehensive, school-based capacity-building initiatives (Memon et al., 2023).

8.1 The SELECT Project and the CPD Model

The primary vehicle for educational reform in the province is the Sindh Early Learning Enhancement through Classroom Transformation (SELECT) project, supported by the World Bank. The SELECT project focuses on improving classroom environments, upgrading school infrastructure, and building the capacity of school leaders and local education management (Kowalski et al., 2014).

Central to the project is the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) model, which utilizes a cluster-cum-school-based approach. Under this framework, a central primary or elementary school serves as the hub for a cluster of local schools, coordinating professional development, guide teacher training, and peer mentorship (Savahl et al., 2024). The CPD model is supported by three key provincial institutions:

- **Provincial Institute for Teacher Education (PITE):** Responsible for developing training materials, selecting master trainers, and delivering school leadership programs focused on classroom management and student support.
- **Sindh Teachers Development Authority (STEDA):** Responsible for quality-assuring teacher training programs and monitoring classroom observation practices.
- **Directorate for Curriculum and Research (DCAR):** Responsible for developing formative assessment materials and reviewing student learning resources (Cantone et al., 2015).

9. Synthesis and Strategic Policy Matrix

Establishing safe, bully-free primary schools across urban and rural Larkana requires a comprehensive shift in how school leadership is trained, supported, and held accountable. The persistent differences between urban and rural school environments mean that school leaders must be equipped with both standard administrative authority and flexible, context-specific strategies (Kliem et al., 2015).

To guide future policy interventions, Table 4 synthesizes the core challenges identified in Larkana and outlines specific, actionable recommendations for educational leaders and

policymakers.

Table 4: Strategic Policy Matrix for Bullying Prevention in Larkana Primary Schools

Identified Challenge	Context	Strategic Policy Intervention	Key Executing Partners
Pervasive Physical & Poly-Bullying	Rural Larkana.	Implement Rigby's Support Group Method and restorative mediation to resolve peer conflicts without physical force.	PITE, School Heads, Guide Teachers.
Relational Exclusion & Cyber-Harassment	Urban Larkana.	Integrate digital literacy, responsible social media use, and bystander empowerment into the daily curriculum.	DCAR, School Heads, Civil Society Helplines.
Systemic Retaliation Against Whistleblowers	District-Wide.	Enforce independent, third-party investigations of school harassment cases, bypassing local education offices.	Sindh Human Rights Commission (SHRC), SELD.
Ineffective Seniority-Based Leadership	District-Wide.	Require school heads to complete specialized training in instructional leadership and positive discipline via SELECT.	STEDA, PITE, World Bank.
Dilapidated & Unsupervised Environments	Rural Larkana.	Mobilize local communities and School Management Committee (SMC) funds to secure school boundaries and solarize facilities.	SMCs, Local Philanthropists, District Government.
Failure to Enforce Anti-Abuse Rules	District-Wide.	Activate school-level Child Protection Committees (CPCs) with a strict mandate to resolve all student complaints within 15 days.	School Heads, SELD, Child Protection Authority.

Ultimately, school bullying in Larkana cannot be solved by isolated disciplinary actions or superficial policies. Eliminating peer victimization requires a sustained commitment from school leaders, provincial education departments, and local communities. By actively implementing the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act, leveraging international capacity-building programs like SELECT, and protecting those who speak out against harassment, Larkana can begin to build an educational system where every child is safe, respected, and supported in their learning journey (Holt et al., 2015).

Conclusion

This review paper has systematically examined the complex, multi-layered challenges of establishing bully-free primary schools in Larkana District, revealing that peer victimization is not merely a localized behavioral issue but a deeply embedded manifestation of structural, cultural, and institutional violence. The comparative analysis of urban and rural contexts demonstrates that bullying profiles differ significantly across geographical settings rural areas grappling with physical aggression and poly-victimization driven by poverty, tribal conflicts, and infrastructure deprivation, while urban schools face rising challenges of relational

exclusion and cyber-harassment facilitated by digital connectivity and classroom overcrowding. The psychological consequences are profound and enduring, with bullied students exhibiting significantly elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, perpetuating a cyclical culture of violence across generations. The review critically evaluates the effectiveness of existing regulatory frameworks, particularly the Sindh Prohibition of Corporal Punishment Act 2016, and identifies substantial implementation gaps. Despite progressive legislation, enforcement remains reactive and inconsistent, undermined by administrative overload, seniority-based leadership appointments, and institutional resistance that leaves whistleblowers vulnerable to retaliation. School leadership emerges as a pivotal determinant of bullying prevention outcomes, with democratic and transformational approaches proving superior to autocratic models in fostering inclusive environments and proactive intervention. Ultimately, sustainable bullying prevention in Larkana demands a comprehensive, integrated approach combining infrastructure improvements, context-specific leadership capacity building through programs like SELECT, active enforcement of child protection mechanisms, and sustained community engagement to challenge deep-seated socio-cultural norms that normalize violence. Only through such systemic transformation can Larkana's primary schools become safe, supportive environments where every child can learn and thrive free from fear and victimization.

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