Over the past few years, Pakistan's relationship with dogs has visibly evolved. In gated communities and urban enclaves, pet ownership has risen sharply. Social media is full of Labradors on patios, Huskies on driveways, and beagles in shopping carts.

On the other hand, public spaces in low- and middle-income areas continue to be shaped by another, more unpredictable reality: the growing presence of stray dogs. Some are watched over by local shopkeepers and households who feed them leftovers or treat them like community guardians.

Caught between these extremes is a growing debate that has become both polarising and deeply personal. Animal rights activists have long opposed the culling of stray dogs, arguing instead for humane sterilisation and vaccination drives. Yet in many neighbourhoods, especially those without security gates or private clinics, residents say they are left to deal with sudden and, at times, deadly attacks, often without any support or empathy.

For K*, a quiet Sunday in May turned into the kind of nightmare he never imagined would unfold within the walls of his own home.

"My family and I lived through a deeply traumatic experience," he recalled, still shaken by the memory. It was a routine day, with all four family members gathered in the drawing room. His wife stepped outside with their two-and-a-half-year-old son to attend to a small chore in the garage. Within moments, everything changed.

Heart-wrenching screams pierced the air. "I froze for a split second," K* said, "unable to grasp what was unfolding." He rushed outside and was confronted with a scene he describes as every husband and father's worst fear. His wife lying on the ground, injured and in shock, while their toddler stood motionless beside her.

A stray dog, described by residents as mad and aggressive, had entered their home unprovoked. According to K*, the same dog had earlier bitten a goat and attacked at least five people in a nearby society that day. "It went for her shoulders, abdomen and legs," he said. His wife, in a moment of instinct and unimaginable courage, managed to protect their child from harm.

Turned away by multiple private hospitals, K* feared the worst as headlines about rabies deaths flashed in his mind. Eventually, they made it to Jinnah Hospital, where his wife received emergency treatment, including anti-rabies shots and wound care.

The dog was later put down by people in the area, but the episode was far from over. What followed was a wave of online abuse and backlash from animal rights groups. K* said the criticism felt unfair and disconnected from the daily realities faced by people like him. “Those who judged us weren’t there when we carried her bleeding into the car, or when our son kept waking up crying in the middle of the night,” he said.

His story offers a glimpse into a larger, more uncomfortable question. In a country battling thousands of dog bite cases annually, how do we protect human lives while still respecting animal rights?

A preventable but deadly crisis

Health experts estimate that Pakistan sees over a million dog bite cases annually. However, these incidents play out quietly in emergency rooms and fatalities are under-reported fatalities every year.

Rabies, which is transmitted through the saliva of infected animals, remains endemic in the country. While the disease is entirely preventable, delays in treatment can turn a bite into a death sentence.

“If a human is bitten by a rabid dog and treatment is delayed, the consequences can be extremely serious and often fatal,” said Dr Wajiha Ahmed, a clinical research scientist based at New York University. She explained that the rabies virus typically enters through a wound and travels slowly through the nervous system. Early signs can include fever and pain at the site of the bite, but once the virus reaches the brain, the symptoms turn severe and irreversible. Confusion, agitation, hallucinations, even a crippling fear of water, are all severe symptoms.

“By the time those neurological signs appear, there is no cure,” Dr Wajiha said. “Treatment becomes supportive at that point, not curative.”

The danger lies not just in the bite, but in the window of response that follows. According to Dr Wajiha, timely care involves thoroughly washing the wound and immediately beginning post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), a course of rabies vaccines and, in some cases, rabies immunoglobulin. Yet in many parts of the country, especially away from urban centres, that care remains out of reach or is poorly understood by the public.

Efforts to tackle rabies, she noted, cannot be limited to hospitals alone. Dr Wajiha emphasised the need for a multi-layered approach. Mass vaccination of dogs, management of stray populations through Catch-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return (CNVR) programs, and sustained public awareness.

“People need to know not just how to react after a bite, but how to avoid one,” she said, pointing to the importance of pet vaccination, early reporting, and reducing contact with unmonitored street dogs.

The science is clear. Rabies is one of the few deadly diseases that remains entirely preventable, yet it continues to thrive in the shadows of policy neglect and misinformation.

Despite the clear medical urgency, the solutions being applied on the ground often lean toward reactionary measures. In many cities, that has meant mass culling of stray dogs, a practice that remains both controversial and widely debated. While some view it as a necessary step to make streets safer, others argue it is neither effective nor ethical. The divide has grown sharper in recent years, raising questions about whether Pakistan is addressing the root of the problem, or simply shifting it further out of sight.

Culling controversy – A flawed fix?

In many parts of Pakistan, local authorities continue to respond to rising stray dog populations by resorting to mass culling. It is a method that dates back decades and is often seen as the fastest way to reduce numbers and calm public concern. Mass culling is often carried out quietly using harmful methods, but critics say it fails to address the root of the problem.

Yet around the world, including in countries with far greater resources and stronger veterinary systems, this approach has largely failed.

Dr Amir Khalil, who serves as Animal Welfare and Rescue Senior Advisor at FOUR PAWS International, has seen the effects of culling firsthand across multiple regions. “In several countries, they have been killing dogs for decades and the stray population still hasn’t gone down,” he said. “I was born in Egypt. They have been killing dogs for over 40 years and the problem remains.”

To him, the issue goes beyond data. “Killing is never a solution,” he said. “Even when you kill the dogs of a city, the dogs from another city will come and take over the empty place. It’s like an empty apartment. Other dogs will come and move in.”

This movement of animals from one area to another is what experts call the vacuum effect. But beyond its ineffectiveness, Dr Khalil also points to the cost of the practice. “Normally, killing a dog is more expensive than castrating or neutering one,” he noted. And while stray dogs can create challenges, he said the real issue is not their existence, but their uncontrolled numbers.

It is this distinction that often gets lost in the broader debate. The sight of dogs roaming the streets triggers fear and frustration, but the absence of coordinated systems, public education, and long-term planning makes those fears harder to resolve.

Humane alternatives. What works globally?

While culling continues to be the go-to response in many parts of Pakistan, international experience points toward a different path, one that prioritises long-term safety without compromising the dignity of animals. The Catch-Neuter-Vaccinate-Return (CNVR) model has gained traction in several countries, particularly in regions that once struggled with aggressive stray dog populations and rabies outbreaks.

Dr Khalil has been involved in animal welfare operations across multiple countries, including post-conflict and disaster zones. From his experience, the shift away from killing dogs toward humane management has delivered not just ethical benefits but measurable results. He added that they’ve seen long-term impact in countries like Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine.

The logic behind CNVR is simple but requires coordination. Dogs are caught, neutered to prevent breeding, vaccinated against rabies, and then released back into their environment. When done consistently and across entire urban zones, the method reduces population growth and eliminates the threat of disease without provoking the vacuum effect that often follows culling.

Dr Khalil also pointed to broader global consensus. “The World Health Organization, the World Food Programme, and other international health organisations recommend CNVR,” he said. “If you vaccinate 70 percent of the dog population in a city, that area becomes free of rabies. This is very important, especially for human safety.”

But success in countries like Romania or Moldova did not come through veterinary departments alone. It required collective action. “It should not be only a veterinary authority,” he stressed. “It should be a group from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Veterinary Authority. They have to work together.”

That spirit of collaboration, however, remains largely missing in Pakistan. According to Dr Khalil, while individual animal welfare groups are trying their best, many work in isolation. “They are working alone without teamwork to support and raise awareness between the people. This will not solve the problem,” he said.

The science exists. The models exist. What remains uncertain is whether there is enough political will, policy alignment, and public engagement to implement these solutions at scale. But even the most humane systems face difficult questions, especially when safety is already compromised. What should be done when a dog becomes aggressive or shows signs of rabies? And how do we balance compassion with public health in those critical moments? The answers are rarely simple, but they lie at the heart of the ethical debate surrounding this crisis.

Ethics in rabies management

Even the most humane frameworks for managing stray dog populations must contend with moments of immediate threat. A dog showing signs of rabies is not simply unpredictable, it is lethal. For residents on the ground, the time between warning and attack is often measured in seconds, not policy papers.

For K*, the question of whether the dog should have been put down doesn't come with philosophical uncertainty. To him, the answer was made clear by the injuries, the panic, and the five other victims already reported by the time his wife was taken to hospital. "Will you wait for the sixth, seventh victim?" he asked. "Again, I am nobody to decide, when the religious guidelines are there."

But even as his family tried to recover from the trauma, a new kind of attack began—this time online. Within hours of sharing a blog post about the incident, K* began receiving messages of support from colleagues and well-wishers. But soon, that shifted. Some people, particularly from the entertainment and activist community, began criticising him for what they saw as complicity in the dog's death. "They didn't even ask how my wife or son were doing," he said. "They started arguing about dog rights like nothing else mattered."

The criticism quickly escalated into something darker. He received abusive WhatsApp messages from unknown numbers and threatening voice notes on Facebook Messenger. "One woman, sounding elderly, told me: 'Your wife and 2.5-year-old child are not more important than that dog. Be ready to get them killed. I will make sure.'"

The toll was immense. "It felt like I had invited the dog to attack my wife just to get attention," he said, "as if I had done it all for some gain." K* consulted his mosque's imam, who provided a fatwa permitting the killing of a rabid dog. He shared it with his critics, but many dismissed it.

Eventually, he contacted cybercrime experts for advice. "One of them told me to forgive them, block the numbers, and move on," he said.. For days, he remained indoors with his wife and children, unable to make sense of the outrage. What stayed with him most, he said, was the silence from those who had once called themselves close friends.

His frustration lies not just in the moral debate, but in the absence of functioning systems. "We are living in a country where people die daily due to the unavailability of ordinary medicines, anti-rabies vaccines, safety measures, hygienic living, and rescue services," he said. In a rare moment of composure within an otherwise emotional account, he added, "If we can create, manage, and run a department to stop a ready-to-attack mad dog from biting its victim and take that dog away peacefully, that would be gold."

K* is also critical of those who oppose action under all circumstances. "No matter what?" he repeated, visibly frustrated. "Under the name of

unconditional love for a dog, should we just stand by and watch our loved ones be attacked, bitten, and risk dying from rabies? I don't understand the mindset of those who defend this, especially when human lives are at stake. It feels like some of these people are completely disconnected from the ground reality."

Dr Khalil believes that responding to rabid animals requires both urgency and ethical responsibility. "If a dog shows signs of rabies, the dog must be caught and quarantined," he said. "It's a 100 percent fatal disease, but also a 100 percent preventable one." He stressed the importance of following international standards that begin with large-scale vaccination efforts, so fewer dogs ever reach that critical point.

Still, the tension remains. On one side are those like K*, who feel abandoned by the system and act out of fear and necessity. On the other are those who caution against panic-driven decisions, calling instead for protocols rooted in science, not emotion. It is not a matter of choosing between people and animals, as both sides quietly imply. It is about whether the state can be trusted to protect both.

What needs to change?

For all the debate between activists, residents, and medical experts, the way forward ultimately depends on the ability of institutions to work together. Pakistan has experimented with piecemeal efforts, but experts say what is missing is a coordinated national plan that can last long enough to make an impact.

Dr Khalil believes the foundation of such a plan lies in human capacity. "I think what we miss in Pakistan is to train the catcher and train the trainer," he said. He recalled the organisation's work in Myanmar, where despite difficult conditions they managed to vaccinate more than 350,000 dogs in a year. "It is really important to apply international standards, but the resources we need most are human resources, people trained in a humane and constructive way to catch the dog, to vaccinate the dog, and to work with national and international organisations to castrate many dogs, especially males."

He added that Pakistan has shown the ability to resolve complex animal welfare issues in the past. "Pakistan can solve this with a coordinated three-to-five-year national plan, just like other countries have done," he said.

Beyond vaccination and training, Dr. Khalil believes the root cause of many stray dog attacks is often overlooked. “We say all the time, animal protection is human protection. It is the first line of defence,” he said. “If we are able to protect this animal, it will be easy to protect this human.”

He explained that stray dogs are often drawn to humans not out of aggression, but dependence. “They come to attack in some regions because they are depending on humans for food. As much as there is rubbish and garbage in the street, this becomes their food source.” For him, even basic municipal planning could help ease the problem. “If the municipality has a good plan to get rid of the rubbish in rural or urban areas, the dogs will eventually disappear because there is no source of food.”

The challenge, then, is not one of knowledge but of commitment. The methods exist, the international support is available, and the urgency is clear. What remains uncertain is whether Pakistan will choose to treat the stray dog crisis as a matter of humane policy and public health rather than a cycle of fear and reaction.