

Children

For the sake of our children

News
25-1-05

Child abuse in Pakistan makes headlines around the world,
but continues to be swept under the carpet at home

Mariana Baabar

For decades, it has been a sight common to Pakistani homes: the bearded maulana teaching children the holy Quran. What has changed over the last few years is the presence of a family elder at these tuitions, irrespective of the child's gender — a tacit deterrence against the teacher making any physical contact with the child. Yes, today's children are quicker at bringing unwanted attention to a family elder's notice than before, but it's still better to be safe, goes the reasoning. It's been going on for years, but the issue exploded last month when for the first time a sitting minister openly talked about its prevalence, at a conference on AIDS in Islamabad.

Pakistan's irrepressible junior minister for religion, ushr and zakat, Dr Amir Liaquat Husain, minister, who conducts a weekly religious programme on a private TV channel, said Pakistan must countenance the harsh truth about the madrassa's role in spreading AIDS, because maulanas are guilty of sexually abusing children. Ironically, his statement came at a time when the Pakistan government has for some time been trying to revamp the country's antediluvian madrassas. The tremendous influence of these seminaries, it is being hoped, could also be used to spread awareness about AIDS.

But, asked Husain, how can those who sexually abuse their pupils be the ones to teach them safe sex? "During a raid on a madrassa in Karachi, I caught a cleric red-handed sexually abusing a student," he revealed. The investigation is underway.

Since that conference on December 1, Husain's remarks have generated much controversy, with clerics, the government and the minister's party, the MQM, joining issue. The clerics' initial response was silence. But as the western media picked up the contentious thread, they rallied to hit back as they could — with death threats to Husain. Not one to be bullied, the minister who is also a medical doctor, began to reel out statistics to strengthen his case. There were 500 reported cases of sexual abuse involving clerics in 2004 and as many as 2,000 in 2003; worse, there hasn't yet been a successful prosecution. The clerics' fury prompted a nervous government to ask the senior religious minister, Ijaz-ul-Haq, to mollify this constituency, one that his father, Zia-ul-Haq, had

difficult to bear, asked Husain to apologise, which he eventually had to, in the last week of December.

Some thought President Pervez Musharraf, whose post-9/11 rhetoric has been anti-fundamentalist, should have publicly backed Husain in taking on the maulanas. Musharraf, however, remained silent, though he is believed to have privately told the junior minister that he shouldn't have apologised.

Some western websites sniffed out a political dimension to the issue. One of them noted gravely, "Rape is practised to break the spirit of the child and make him obedient to the extent that he can carry out terrorist acts, including suicide bombing. The minister should take the funds available from foreign sources and simply take the pre-teen children out of residential seminaries, (besides) replacing them with normal schools."

There were 500 reported cases in 2004 of sexual abuse and as many as 2,000 in 2003. Worse, there hasn't yet been a successful prosecution

Others saw a global trend in sexual abuse incidents in Pakistan's religious seminaries. There have been infamous cases of Catholic priests sexually exploiting children in the West, and the Hindu priests doing the same (the Kanchi math) in India currently.

"Abusing children has devastating effects on their lives later on," notes Karachi-based psychologist Dr Iffat Hussain, "Sexual abuse not only destroys the child's personality but also turns such abused individuals into culprits later on."

The controversy received a fresh impetus recently with a workshop in Islamabad organised by the National AIDS Control Programme. Its goal: to convince religious leaders to encourage HIV/AIDS patients to use contraceptives rather than separating from their partners. They were also encouraged to talk about the HIV/AIDS kit in their Friday sermons. But is the cleric suited for the job?

issue of child sexual abuse and brutalisation in religious seminaries.

Case One: In June 2004, when five-year-old Talha did not return from the Lajna mosque in Lahore, where he had gone to take Quranic lessons from Maulvi Mohammad Altaf, his mother went to fetch him. She found the boy in the corridor of the mosque, bleeding and unconscious; the maulvi was missing from the mosque. A FIR was duly lodged. Altaf was subsequently arrested and Talha identified him as the person who had sodomised him. The family was determined to pursue the case. But soon different religious groups began to mount pressure on them to drop the case; the family was even told that these "maulvis have links with Al Qaeda". Pressure was, apparently, also brought upon the police. The family ultimately relented in July, agreeing to not pursue their case and withdrawing their witnesses.

Case Two: Sanam, 9, daughter of Mohammad Saleh Kori, a resident of the Microwave Colony, Sukkur, Sind, was a student of Abdul Wahid Chachar's madrassa. On February 15, 2004, at the end of her classes, Maulvi Abdul Wahid told her that she was his wife and would have to live with him. Sanam rushed out to tell her parents about the incident. When her father went to the madrassa to complain, Abdul produced a nikahnama bearing Kori and Sanam's signatures. Apparently, the maulana had asked them to sign on a form, claiming it would enable the family to receive zakat (charity money). The illiterate father had been unable to distinguish between a zakat form and a nikahnama. Worse, the local Chachar tribesmen began pressuring him to hand over Sanam to Abdul.

Case Three: Child abuse in seminaries often includes physical torture, as in the case of 11-year-old Atif. Brutally assaulted at a seminary in Faisalabad, he is currently undergoing treatment at the Children's Hospital in Lahore. On May 1, 2004, he was quoted saying, "I was punished by the teacher who wanted to make an example of me because I dared to escape from the daily routine of beatings at the seminary." Once nabbed, he was chained and detained in a room at the seminary; Maulvi Mahboob Alam then beat him severely with an iron rod. The hospital's treatment note says the boy was brought in with a head injury and bruises all over his body.

in 2003; worse, there hasn't yet been a successful prosecution. The clerics' fury prompted a nervous government to ask the senior religious minister, Ijaz-ul-Haq, to mollify this constituency, one that his father, Zia-ul-Haq, had so assiduously cultivated.

In the Senate, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal and even liberal parties like the Pakistan People's Party banded together to demand an apology from Husain. "Actually, Husain made a sweeping statement and painted everyone black with his brush. He should have talked about specific examples," PPP spokesperson Farhatullah Babar told this writer. The MQM, finding the heat

HIV/AIDS patients to use contraceptives rather than separating from their partners. They were also encouraged to talk about the HIV/AIDS kit in their Friday sermons. But is the cleric suited for the job?

An amount of \$225 million has been earmarked to modernise 8,000 madrassas over three years - a modernisation programme that could help spread AIDS awareness too — according to a 2003 report by SPARC (Society for Protection of the Rights of the Child).

The report notes that 14 per cent of all child-abusers in 2003 were clerics. SPARC activists cite three specific cases from 2004 that illustrate the

chained and detained in a room at the seminary; Maulvi Mahboob Alam then beat him severely with an iron rod. The hospital's treatment note says the boy was brought in with a head injury and bruises all over the body. Atif's case came to light following the intervention of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

It's one thing to take legal action against culprits or modernise madrassas. It's quite another to retreat against the fury of extremists keen to insulate their arcane world from scrutiny and criticism. A pity Pakistanis let down Husain.

The writer is a staff member