**Change is needed**

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| `THERE will be accountability for all.That was the promise delivered by the prime minister following the latest round of horrific child abuse and murders in Kasur.A purge of the local police force and some arrests have followed. But the state`s response to abuse of children remains belated and ramshackle. In this context, the prime minister`s call to launch a mobile app to tackle child sexual abuse is interesting, highlighting the fine line between using technology to problem solving and distracting from systemic government failings.Mera Bachcha Alert would reportedly enable better tracking of child abuse cases, sharing information about affected children with all provincial police IGs and linking to the Pakistan Citizen Portal where the cases` progress could be monitored.This is not a novel idea. A mobile app was released last year in Nakura County in Kenya to facilitate reporting of child abuse cases. Reports via the app are lodged with the local chief and a community health worker. These individuals follow up by verifying the report and forwarding as required to the police, medics, relevant government agencies and mental health counsellors.Similarly, in 2016, a high number of deaths of indigenous children in state-run schools led the Maharashtra State Child Rights Protection Commission in India to launch a mobile app to stem child abuse.The app forwarded reports of abuse to the commission, which forwarded them to the police or child rights` organisations as appropriate. The mobile app also provided information on children`s rights and relevant legislation.Given the scale of child sexual abuse, Unicef recognises the value of technological intervendons to support state responses to and service provision for abused children.Globally, one in 10 children experience sexual violence;in 93 per cent of cases the child knows the abuser. According to the NGO Sahil, there were 3,832 reported cases of child abuse in Pakistanin 2018 (the actual number is likely much higher). In light of such widespread abuse, the use of mobile apps or other tech platforms to report abuse, track the progress of cases, provide information and collect data on various facets of the abuse (both on the victims and on the state`s response) is sensible.An app would save the time and money of thosereportingcasesas theywouldnolonger have to travel to multiple police centres, NGOs, or other agencies to bring attention to the case. It would also increase accountability of police officials investigating such cases because the app would create a digital record of when a complaint was made and what it detailed, preventing it from being alteredlater. Simultaneous reporting to multiple police authorities and other relevant parties would also improve transparency and reduce the likelihood of a case being left on the books to fester local police of ficials would be less able to turn families away and suggest that they pursue the investigation themselves, as repeatedly happened in Kasur.The anonymity afforded by an app would also likely increase the number of reports of child abuse. In close-knit communities, people are pressurised through familial and social links to stay silent when they become aware of child abuse in an effort to prevent further disruption, save face, or keep the peace. A mobile app would provide a way for a witness to make a discreet report.But a mobile app is not a panacea. It can only document and track in a broader con-text where social taboos, police corruption and inefficiency, backlogged courts and poor mental health services persist. An app can only be considered a meaningful state response if it is accompanied by systemic change, including police reform and training, tighter legis-lation, and a powerful awareness-building strategy for both families and law enforcers.The sharing of sensitive information via a mobile app also raises questions about privacy and data security. There are concerns on these counts due to attempts to infiltrate online systems both by state and non-state actors. No apps should be launched without more transparency about the government`s approach to ensuring data security.There are also potential fallouts of increased child abuse reports. Some of these could be false claims, lodged as a vendetta, and prompt, effective investigations are essential to rule out such scenarios.Local police departments will also have to considerresourcing andtrainingneeds,asa higher number of unheeded complaints would breed further f rustration and rage.Our prime minister knows that launching an app signals proactivity, efficiency, transparency all the things you`d want a government process aimed at stamping out a heinous crime to be. Technology provides governments a great way to sell themselves.But the quick fix of a digital intervention cannot substitute for good governance. The writer is a freelance journalist.huma.yusuf@gmail.com Twitter: @humayusuf |