**[Entrenched abuse](https://www.dawn.com/news/1796413/entrenched-abuse)**

[Ali Burhan Mustafa](https://www.dawn.com/authors/10715/ali-burhan-mustafa) | [Urooj Zafar](https://www.dawn.com/authors/10714/urooj-zafar) Published December 9, 2023

IN the shadow of Zainab Ansari’s tragic case in 2018, the 2020 conviction of Sohail Ayaz for child sexual abuse casts a spotlight on the epidemic of such crimes in Pakistan. Ayaz, with similar convictions in the UK and Italy, became a grim testament to the cracks in Pakistan’s protective measures. That a known offender could infiltrate government ranks in KP and continue his crimes signals a systemic collapse of our safeguards for the innocent. It is an urgent reminder to implement stringent reforms to shield our children from predators lurking within the very systems designed to protect them.

The apprehension of a cleric in Dhapai village for child sexual abuse also exposes the problems in Punjab’s social structure, where such offences against children are symptomatic of a wider systemic failure. This event, coupled with the 2015 Kasur scandal involving the abuse of almost 300 children, points to a persistent pattern of neglect by society and the judiciary. These are manifestations of a severe societal crisis. The Kasur incident, which uncovered a paedophilia network, demands a powerful response to dismantle these criminal structures. It is also critical to confront and heal the deep psychological wounds inflicted on the victims.

The children of Kasur, Dhapai, Rawalpindi and other regions deserve fortified defences that assure their right to a secure childhood. The government, civic organisations, and all Pakistanis must convert the rhetoric of child protection into decisive action. We must shield our most vulnerable from abuse and prevent the recurrence of past tragedies.

Sahil reports a distressing statistic for the first half of 2023: over 2,227 child abuse cases with an alarmingly low conviction rate of less than two per cent. Abduction is the most prevalent crime, with sodomy, rape, and missing children following suit. Even more disquieting is the fact that in most incidents, the perpetrators were familiar to victims or their families, shattering the trust at the most fundamental community level. Predominantly occurring in Punjab, but also significantly present in Sindh and Islamabad, these figures are not just statistics but a stark imperative for immediate, robust policy overhaul and action.

Addressing child sexual abuse requires psychiatric insights.

Pakistan must fortify its legal structures, including the enhancement of child pornography statutes and the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, to nurture a child-centric legal milieu. Education on self-defence, public awareness drives, and sex education initiatives at the community level must augment these legal improvements. Moreover, the institution of a national registry for sexual offenders is indispensable to bolstering vigilance and forestalling their access to influential positions. Within this framework, the Zainab Alert Bill emerges as a beacon of hope, offering advanced alert systems and response protocols.

Addressing child sexual abuse in Pakistan requires a strategy enriched by psychiatric insights, advocating for broad media outreach to educate on the perils facing children. Such campaigns must illuminate the signs of abuse across the spectrum — physical, emotional, sexual, neglectful. Embracing this preventative mindset propels a shift from a reactive to a proactive societal role, focusing on safeguarding the vulnerable before harm can occur.

However, the shortage of child psychiatrists — less than a dozen in a nation of millions — exemplifies a glaring deficiency in our healthcare infrastructure, particularly in mental health. Concentrated in metropolitan areas, these specialists are a scarce resource for a vast majority of the population.

Moreover, the disciplines of forensic and community psychiatry remain uncharted territories in Pakistan — sectors that are integral to assessing the accountability of child-related offen­ces and facilitating the rehabilitation of offenders. The concept of correctional forensic psychiatry, which is instrumental in the modern rehabilitative process, has yet to be recognised and implemented.

In confronting child sexual abuse, Pakistan’s response must move past the idea of severe punishments as sole deterrents. There is a need to refocus efforts on rehabilitative justice, as punitive measures such as castration may not be wholly effective. Media campaigns should facilitate a deeper understanding of offender psychology and bolster community awareness, while suggestions for rehabilitation, coupled with educational reforms, will mark a progressive step towards safeguarding our youth.

*Dr Ali Burhan Mustafa is secretary, Pakistan Psychiatric Society, Punjab chapter and associate professor, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioural Sciences, Sheikh Zayed Medical College/Hospital, Rahim Yar Khan. Dr Urooj Zafar is assistant professor, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioural Sciences, Sheikh Zayed Medical College/Hospital, Rahim Yar Khan.*

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