**[Unveiling child abuse](https://www.dawn.com/news/1773214/unveiling-child-abuse)**

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CHILD abuse is once again in the spotlight, with the emergence of hashtags #JusticeForRizwana and #JusticeForFatima trending on Twitter within a single month. Mainstream media, too, extensively covered the two cases of minor girls working as domestic help. Due to public outrage, the authorities have initiated action against the alleged perpetrators. These cases underscore that whether it’s the federal capital or Khairpur, our minors remain unsafe across the country. Although child abuse has been rampant for long, there has been no significant effort to give our young ones a secure childhood by ensuring their basic right to live without abuse and neglect.

These instances are not the first or the last cases of child abuse that have gained media and public attention. NGO Sahil’s data reveals that in the first half of 2023, a staggering 2,227 cases of child abuse were reported, translating to an average of 12 children abused daily, an increase from 10 per day in 2021. Out of these, 164 were sexual abuse cases, 984 abductions, 201 missing children, and 14 marriage cases. Dist­u­rbingly, there were 53 cases of pornography and one case of incest. Of the total, 457 victims were girls and 593 boys, aged six to 15 years.

Sahil also revealed that 47 per cent of ca­ses were reported from urban areas and 54pc from rural areas. Unfortunately, precise data on children engaged in labour, in­cl­uding domestic labour, remains unavailable.

These alarming statistics may not fully represent the extent of the issue, as many cases go unreported for reasons of family ‘honour’ and financial compensation. To effectively combat child abuse, it is important to comprehend its implications for society and children’s well-being. Holding perpetrators accountable is crucial to prevention, as is educating children about abuse and enabling them to safeguard themselves from potential harm.

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One must also understand the distinction between child abuse and child neglect. Child neglect often leads to abuse. Child neglect emerges when children are denied basic needs such as parental care, education, food, health and a safe environment. Such neglect can leave scars for life, if not addressed. Parents and caretakers bear the responsibility of ensuring that children’s needs are met. Neglected children are more susceptible to being abused or to struggle for survival. Unicef estimates that an estimated 22.8 million children aged five to 16 lack access to schooling, constituting 44pc of the population in that age group. Despite Article 25A of the Constitution guaranteeing the right to education, this crisis persists. Experts estimate that around 1,200 children under five die daily in Pakistan due to malnutrition. Neglecting children’s health remains an alarming issue. Just as with providing decent education, ensuring a balanced diet for all children, including those who don’t attend school, is urgent and imperative.

Child abuse means intentionally hurting or mistreating a person under 18, a criminal offence. It has various forms: physical, emotional, sexual and medical abuse.

Physical abuse involves hitting a child, including pushing, choking, punching, shaking, or using objects like belts or sticks to inflict pain or leave marks. A child can be taken away from lawful guardianship, with or without consent, leading to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. They might be confined, tortured, raped or deprived of basic necessities. Some children even face marriage or forced labour, exacerbating the issue.

Emotional or psychological abuse inflicts trauma through tantrums, insults, criticism and threats, diminishing the child’s self-worth. Preventing social interactions and cultural needs, enforcing isolation, or cyberbullying are other forms. Some children fall victim to blackmail involving indecent acts, leading to fear and reduced self-esteem.

Sexual abuse includes rape, inappropriate touching, and exposure to explicit content. Children’s vulnerability is exploited through incest, seduction, and using them for sexual photography or content creation. Medical abuse entails withholding or imposing excessive, unnecessary medical care on a child, causing harm.

Fostering open communication between parents and children is vital to addressing abuse and its outcome effectively. Encou­raging trust and providing a supportive environment enables children to share their concerns freely. Parents should heed their children’s complaints, creating a safe space for disclosure.

Combating child abuse requires acknowledging its prevalence, understanding its forms, and advocating for children’s rights. It necessitates collaboration among society, the authorities and institutions to ensure children’s safety and well-being.

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