



RESEARCH PAPER

Understanding the Prevalence of Child Abuse in Pakistan: A
Comprehensive Study

¹Dr Saeeda Shah, ²Taniya Ahmed* and ³Ghulam Mujtaba Malik

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan
2. Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Criminology, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, University of Law, Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: Taniya.channa@usindh.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This research was conducted using secondary research methodology to collect data from various sources, primarily the non-governmental organization Sahil, which actively works to safeguard children from sexual abuse in Pakistan. The study has three primary goals, including highlighting the prevalence of child abuse in Pakistan by providing district-specific data, examining which age group and gender are more susceptible to child maltreatment, and identifying the most common forms of child abuse. The data gathered from secondary sources revealed that in 2022, the district of Punjab recorded the maximum number of documented cases of child abuse, while the district of Sindh came in second place. Moreover, according to the data, the age groups (6-10) and (11-15) are highly vulnerable, with females being more susceptible to child abuse (55% of the victims were female, while 45% were male). The secondary data also highlighted the horrifying reality of various forms of child abuse, such as sexual abuse, sodomy, rape, attempted abuse, child pornography, homicide following sexual abuse, and incest. The trend of increasing child abuse in Pakistan requires immediate attention and intervention. Therefore, the current study highlighted pertinent recommendations for combating child maltreatment. This necessitates collaboration between government bodies, non-government organizations, and local communities to identify the fundamental causes of abuse in each region and implement preventive measures accordingly. Prevention, education, and assistance are crucial for addressing this pervasive problem and assuring a safer, healthier future for Pakistan's children.

KEYWORDS Child Maltreatment, Child Sexual Abuse, Early Victimization, Gender-Related Issues, Trafficking In Persons (TIP), World Health Organization, Youth Empowerment

Introduction

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children." - Nelson Mandela.

Children of today are not only the future but also the essence of society. They represent the possibility of progress, innovation, and positive change. Children can shape the world, build on the foundations established by previous generations, and create a brighter, more compassionate future. Their innocence, inquisitiveness, and limitless potential remind us to invest in their well-being, education, and care. When we promote children's rights, provide them with quality education, ensure their safety, and nurture their talents and aspirations, we secure their futures and foster the development of a fair, prosperous, and just society. Recognizing the significance of children is an acknowledgement of our collective duty to pave the way for a better world in which every child can flourish and positively contribute to the betterment of

humanity (Walker et al., 2022). However, it is overwhelming to acknowledge that, despite children's indisputable significance as the harbingers of society's future, their fundamental rights are frequently denied, and their potential is systematically thwarted. A significant number of children, regardless of their gender, encounter not only the severe infringement of their fundamental rights but also persistent physical and emotional trauma that may have long-lasting effects. These transgressions extend beyond the immediate physical and mental consequences, impeding children's proper growth and development, hence impeding their ability to live satisfying and fruitful lives. These children are exposed to "Child Abuse" and neglect, resulting in the deprivation of a secure and caring environment to which they are entitled.

Consequently, their trust in adults is compromised, their self-esteem is impaired, and they develop a profound sense of fear and insecurity (Siegel, J.P. 2013). It is a pervasive societal concern that has afflicted communities worldwide for an extended time. The issue is a matter of great concern, marked by the maltreatment, disregard, and utilization of minors, frequently perpetrated by individuals entrusted with their supervision and welfare. Over time, this matter has escalated to assume a crucial significance, necessitating immediate focus from governmental bodies, communities, and individuals alike. Child abuse transcends geographical, cultural, and economic boundaries. Children in both industrialized and developing nations are impacted by this phenomenon, regardless of their social standing, racial background, or ethnic identity. The magnitude of this issue is concerning, as a significant number of children across the globe are subjected to various forms of abuse or neglect. The abuse of children is a pervasive global epidemic that impacts a significant number of children each year (UNICEF, 2023).

Child abuse, as defined by the World Health Organization, is a range of actions, including physical and emotional harm, sexual abuse, neglect, or negligent treatment, which can result in actual or potential harm to a child's well-being, development or overall health (Al muneef, 2011; Moore et al., 2014). Furthermore, the "Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act" provides an all-encompassing delineation of child abuse and neglect, also called child maltreatment. Child maltreatment refers to any current, encompasses behavior or lack thereof exhibited by a parent or caregiver that leads to significant physical or emotional suffering, sexual abuse or exploitation, or presents an immediate threat of causing severe harm to a child (Black, 2008). Neglect refers to the inability to provide a child's basic needs, such as insufficient nourishment, housing, necessary supervision, required medical or mental healthcare, suitable education, or emotional assistance. Bodily abuse includes intentional behaviors that inflict pain onto a child, including but not limited to striking, kicking, assaulting, biting, or engaging in other actions that lead to bodily harm (Lewis et al., 2011). Sexual abuse refers to a minor's deliberate utilization, persuasion, or coercion to participate in sexual acts or simulations. Violence against children has profoundly impacted the lives of as many as 1 billion children, resulting in enduring and expensive emotional, social, and economic repercussions. On a global scale, it is approximated that one in every two children aged 2–17 experiences various forms of violence annually, and a staggering 120 million girls are believed to have endured forced sexual contact before age 20.

Furthermore, emotional violence affects one in three children, and one in four children worldwide reside in environments marred by violence (UNICEF, 2020). According to the most recent data from 2021 in the United States, there were approximately 600,000 distinct occurrences of child abuse and neglect, underscoring the significant magnitude of this matter (Brown et al., 2021). It is imperative to

acknowledge that the actual magnitude of child abuse is likely more substantial, given that many cases remain undisclosed.

Amid Pakistan struggling with a slew of critical concerns ranging from political instability to economic woes, the country is also experiencing a troubling increase in child abuse cases. According to recent research, child abuse is rising, with many youngsters suffering from various forms of maltreatment. This increase in child abuse endangers the well-being of the nation's children and adds to the already overburdened social and healthcare systems. According to a comprehensive study conducted by the Sahil Foundation, the alarming incidence of child abuse cases in Pakistan saw a significant 11% increase in 2022, with a distressing total of 4,139 reported incidents (Abro, 2023). Furthermore, Pakistan stands as one of the prominent nations grappling with the alarming issue of child sexual abuse (CSA) globally. Disturbingly, it is reported that approximately 550,000 (0.55 million) children endure abuse on an annual basis within the country (The Nation, 2023). This staggering statistic underscores the urgent need for robust measures to combat child sexual abuse in Pakistan.

Consequently, this comprehensive study is embarked upon with a paramount objective: to shed light on the grave and deeply concerning issue of child abuse, which inflicts lasting harm upon our vulnerable children. The research is meticulously designed to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of child abuse, encompassing its various forms and manifestations. Furthermore, it endeavors to discern critical age and gender disparities by scrutinizing the trends in child abuse and their gender-related implications. Additionally, the study extends its purview to identify the specific settings where child abuse incidents transpire, pinpointing the environments that pose the most ominous risks to children within Pakistan. This endeavor holds profound significance as it seeks to serve as a clarion call, making the direness of child abuse unmistakably evident. By highlighting the severity of this issue, it aims to catalyze essential actions from the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and policymakers. This research is poised to become an invaluable resource, equipping these stakeholders with a deep understanding of the multifaceted challenges posed by child abuse. Armed with this knowledge, they can formulate and implement policies and interventions geared toward curbing the prevalence of child abuse across our nation.

Moreover, the study is not confined to policy and governance alone. It reaches out to parents and caregivers, offering them essential insights to protect their children from the scourge of abuse. It emphasizes the importance of nurturing a loving and supportive environment for victimized children, ensuring they find solace and healing amid adversity. In sum, this research endeavor aspires to be a catalyst for transformative change, safeguarding the well-being and future of the most vulnerable members of our society – our children.

Literature Review

Child abuse is a global issue with no borders that affect civilizations worldwide. Surprisingly, an estimated 40 million youngsters are abused each year. This bleak reality pervades all sectors of society, regardless of socioeconomic standing, cultural affiliations, religious backgrounds, or educational levels. While physical violence is generally associated with child abuse, it is critical to comprehend that other forms of abuse can be just as harmful. The last two decades have seen the rapid global proliferation of digital technologies, ushering in a new era of online dangers. This transition has not only brought forth new forms of abuse but has also aggravated

offline abuses, notably in the context of child protection (Beech et al. 2021). The online grooming of youngsters for the dark intentions of sexual abuse and exploitation is an alarming development. Concurrently, there has been an increase in occurrences involving live streaming of child sexual abuse via the Internet and widespread sharing of child sexual abuse content. The volume of child sexual abuse materials circulating on the surface and hidden webs has reached worrisome proportions, with millions of photographs (UNICEF, 2020).

Furthermore, several studies from many countries and cultures provide a holistic look at child psychological abuse and neglect. One meta-analytical study provided a global view of the prevalence of child psychological maltreatment (Alink et al., 2012; Hoseini et al., 2015), while separate research projects shed light on child physical neglect and emotional neglect (Levine et al., 2014; Gill et al., 2017)). These studies have also revealed a variety of risk variables at the child, parent, and family levels, including age, gender, and exposure to family violence, child labor, single motherhood, low parental education, extended family structures, and poverty, highlighting the problem's complexity.

Over time, theoretical frameworks addressing child abuse and neglect have evolved as the field has grown in sophistication. Building on the foundational work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Belsky (1984), who discerned a web of interconnected yet embedded elements contributing to these issues, these risk factors can be categorized into three key dimensions: individual-level, family-related, and contextual factors. The contextual factors encompass the more prominent social systems that shape parental functioning, including macro-system factors, which encapsulate the societal or cultural dynamics that foster child abuse or neglect. Among the individual-level risk factors, evidence from the literature powerfully underscores the impact of parental substance abuse, prior history of child abuse or neglect, and experiences of depression as significant contributors to child abuse and neglect. Stressful environments and the pernicious influence of poverty have also been extensively examined, revealing their noteworthy roles in this context (Anne et al., 2014).

Moreover, several other factors have emerged as potential risk factors that exhibit varying degrees of support in the literature concerning their association with child abuse. These include children with disabilities, parental psychopathology, early onset of childbearing, low socioeconomic status, and prevailing societal attitudes toward disciplinary practices and corporal punishment (Boyce et al., 2011; Chudal et al., 2017). It is crucial to recognize that risk factors rarely exist in isolation. Instead, several studies have highlighted the profound impact of having multiple risk factors co-occur, significantly elevating the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

Child abuse, specifically sexual abuse, is a pressing issue in Pakistan. A retrospective study conducted by Abbas and Jabeen (2020) shed light on the prevalence of child abuse in the country. This research, which included an equal number of male and female respondents (44% males and 39% females), found that a concerning 41% of respondents reported experiencing at least one form of sexual abuse during their childhood. Among the various factors contributing to this distressing situation, one of the most significant is the relationship quality between parents and their children. The study highlights the importance of understanding the dynamics within the parent-child relationship as a critical factor in addressing child abuse in Pakistan.

Similarly, the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report from the U.S. Department of State has been instrumental in evaluating Pakistan's efforts to combat

human trafficking and juvenile exploitation (Mirza, 2010). Despite focusing predominantly on trafficking, these reports provide insight into the broader issue of child abuse and exploitation. They have highlighted various forms of abuse, such as juvenile labor, forced marriages, and sexual exploitation, and provided a global context for understanding Pakistan's concerns regarding child abuse. Numerous dimensions of child abuse in Pakistan have been investigated in the academic realm. Moreover, Imran et al. (2020) have investigated the determinants of child labor, casting light on variables such as family income, parental education, and parental employment status. This study highlights the economic aspect of child maltreatment and poverty's role in compelling children to work. Childhood abuse, comprising both physical and emotional forms, has the potential to give rise to a diverse range of physical and mental health complications. These issues encompass a range of conditions, including prevalent mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), self-injurious behavior such as self-harm, personality pathology characterized by disturbances in one's self-concept and interpersonal relationships, psychosis involving a detachment from reality, and even sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) resulting from the heightened susceptibility and risky behaviors commonly observed among individuals who have undergone childhood abuse (Hyder, 2007; Naeem et al., 2019; Kadir, 2019).

The Government of Pakistan has put in place a legal framework aimed at safeguarding the rights and well-being of children. One of these significant measures is the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance 2000, which addresses issues related to juvenile offenders and their rights within the justice system. In the province of Punjab, a landmark bill was passed to protect destitute and neglected children, emphasizing the importance of their welfare and care. Additionally, the government has taken steps to combat child abuse by amending the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) 1860. Section 332 of the PPC provides a comprehensive definition of "hurt" as any action that causes pain, harm, or injury without resulting in death. The law prescribes punishments for those who commit such acts, which may involve compensation or 'qisas', a form of retribution involving causing similar harm (Farooq, 2017).

Moreover, the legal framework includes specific provisions addressing child sexual abuse. This form of abuse is treated as a criminal act, and the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 classifies child molestation as an act of terrorism and violence (Raza et al., 2022). These measures underscore the severity with which child abuse is regarded in the legal context. To align with international standards, Article 37(a) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that no child should be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (Farmer, 2011). Pakistan has adopted this principle to protect its children from such forms of abuse. However, implementing child protection laws has some legal ambiguities and challenges. For instance, the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act 2007 permits a certain degree of punishment for disciplining children with valid reasons. This law has not undergone revisions, leading to uncertainties in its interpretation and application, which, in turn, hinder the effective enforcement of child protection laws. Addressing these challenges and ensuring consistent and stringent enforcement of these laws are vital in safeguarding the well-being of children in Pakistan.

Material and Methods

This study aims to employ secondary research methodologies to gain in-depth knowledge of the prevalence of child abuse in Pakistan. Secondary data is gathered from numerous government reports, non-governmental organization (NGO) reports

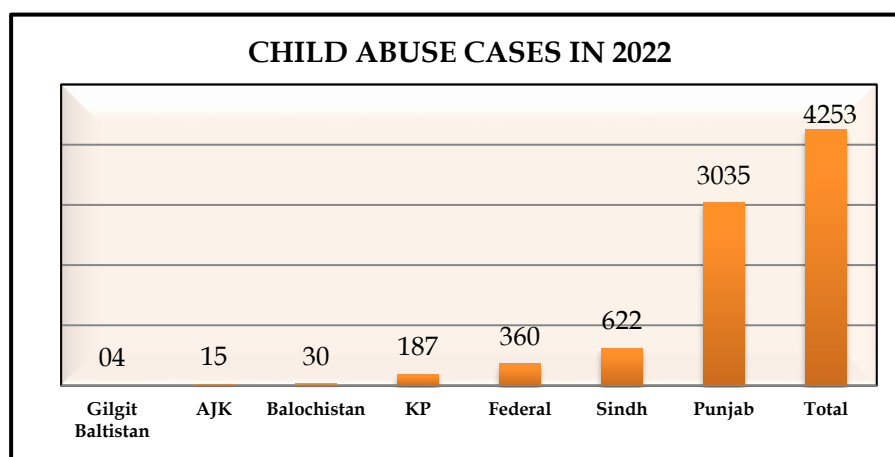
such as “Sahil”, and academic articles. This methodology has been selected to provide a thorough and current analysis of the prevalence of child maltreatment in Pakistan. The study primarily examines existing data and reports that cast light on the nation's scope and nature of child abuse. The collected data is meticulously analyzed. It entails a comprehensive review and synthesis of information about child abuse, concentrating on its prevalence, types, age and gender disparities, and geographic areas where such incidents are more prevalent. The gathered information is organized, classified, and presented coherently. Due to the study's exclusive reliance on secondary data, ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity do not apply to the same extent as in human participant-based primary research. The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on previously collected data, which may contain limitations or biases intrinsic to their original sources. The precision and breadth of the findings depend on the quality and quantity of the data provided in the selected reports and articles. Moreover, this research methodology was chosen to cover the strategy for comprehending the prevalence of child abuse in Pakistan using secondary sources. It aims to provide policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and concerned citizens with valuable insights into the extent and nature of child abuse in the country by compiling data from multiple sources.

Results and Discussion

In pursuit of the primary objective of this study, which is to highlight the prevalence of child abuse in Pakistan by providing district-wise data, the following section presents research findings derived from secondary sources. These findings have been sourced from the Sahil NGO, which systematically collects data on child abuse cases across all Pakistan districts. The NGO compiles this data annually, primarily from newspaper reports and cases directly reported to their organization. In 2022, Sahil NGO meticulously monitored (81) national, regional, and local newspapers from all provinces, amassing a total of (4,253) reported cases of child abuse during that year.

According to the first objective is to provide an in-depth understanding of the incidence of child abuse in Pakistan, categorized by district. The findings reveal a significant variation in the number of reported cases across regions in 2022. Punjab emerges as the most concerning province, with a disturbing total of 3,035 documented cases, signaling a higher risk for children in this area. Sindh reported 622 cases in close proximity, and the federal territory recorded 360 cases.

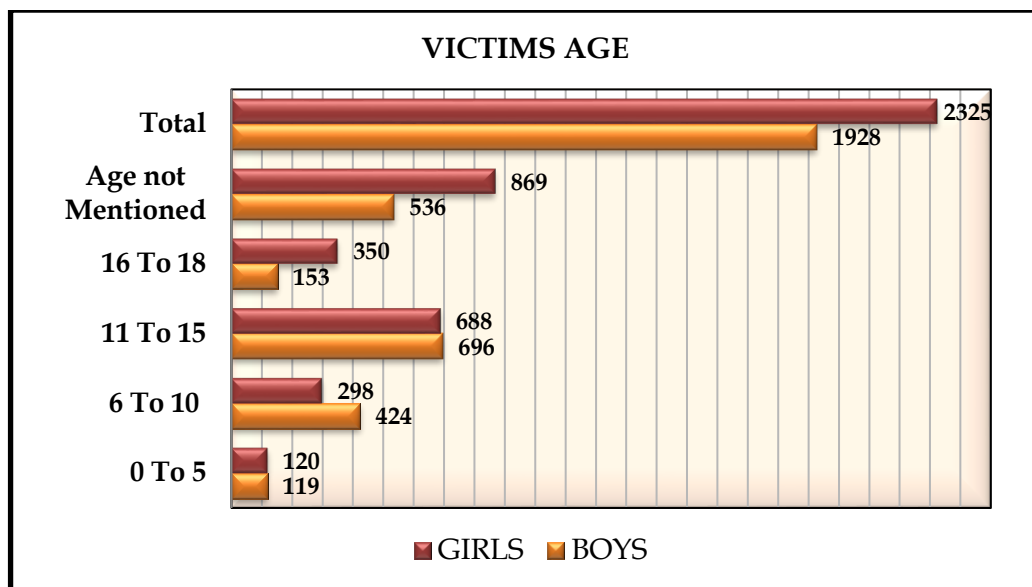
In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 187 cases were officially registered, highlighting the issue's prevalence in this region. Baluchistan, on the other hand, documented 30 cases. In stark contrast, AJK reported the fewest instances, with 15 cases, followed by Gilgit Baltistan, where an alarmingly low number of only four cases were officially recorded. These statistics are visually represented in (Figure 01) below, underscoring the regional disparities in child abuse incidents across Pakistan.



Regarding the study's second objective, which aims to identify the age groups most susceptible to child abuse and examine gender discrepancies, the data obtained from the 2022 report of Sahil NGO offers significant and informative perspectives. The study's results emphasize that child maltreatment substantially affects children in two specific age groups: 6-10 years and 11-15 years. From examining the data depicted in (Figure 02) below, it becomes evident that child abuse transcends age boundaries, as even children as young as 0-5 years are not spared. In this age group, the data shows that (119) boys and (120) girls have unfortunately experienced child abuse. Moving to the 6-10 age brackets, the statistics indicate that boys bear the brunt of victimization, with (424) cases reported, while girls have also been subjected to abuse, with (298) reported cases. The trend continues in the 11-15 age group, with boys experiencing higher rates of victimization (696 cases), while girls are also significantly affected (688 cases). As children transition into the 16-18 age groups, it is observed that the incidence of abuse, while lower in total numbers, still exists. In this age range, (153) boys and (350) girls were victims of child abuse.

In some cases, the age of the child is not specified. Nevertheless, these cases are significant, with (536) boys and (869) girls affected by child abuse, highlighting the pervasive nature of this issue. An interesting observation is that boys are slightly more victimized than girls in the 6-10 and 11-15 age groups.

However, the overall figures reveal that girls are still disproportionately affected. In 2022 alone, the report points out that distressing total of (2,325) girl fell victim to child abuse. The gender breakdown underscores the vulnerability of both girls and boys to abuse. Among the (4,252) reported cases of child abuse, approximately (55%) of the victims were girls, while (45%) were boys.

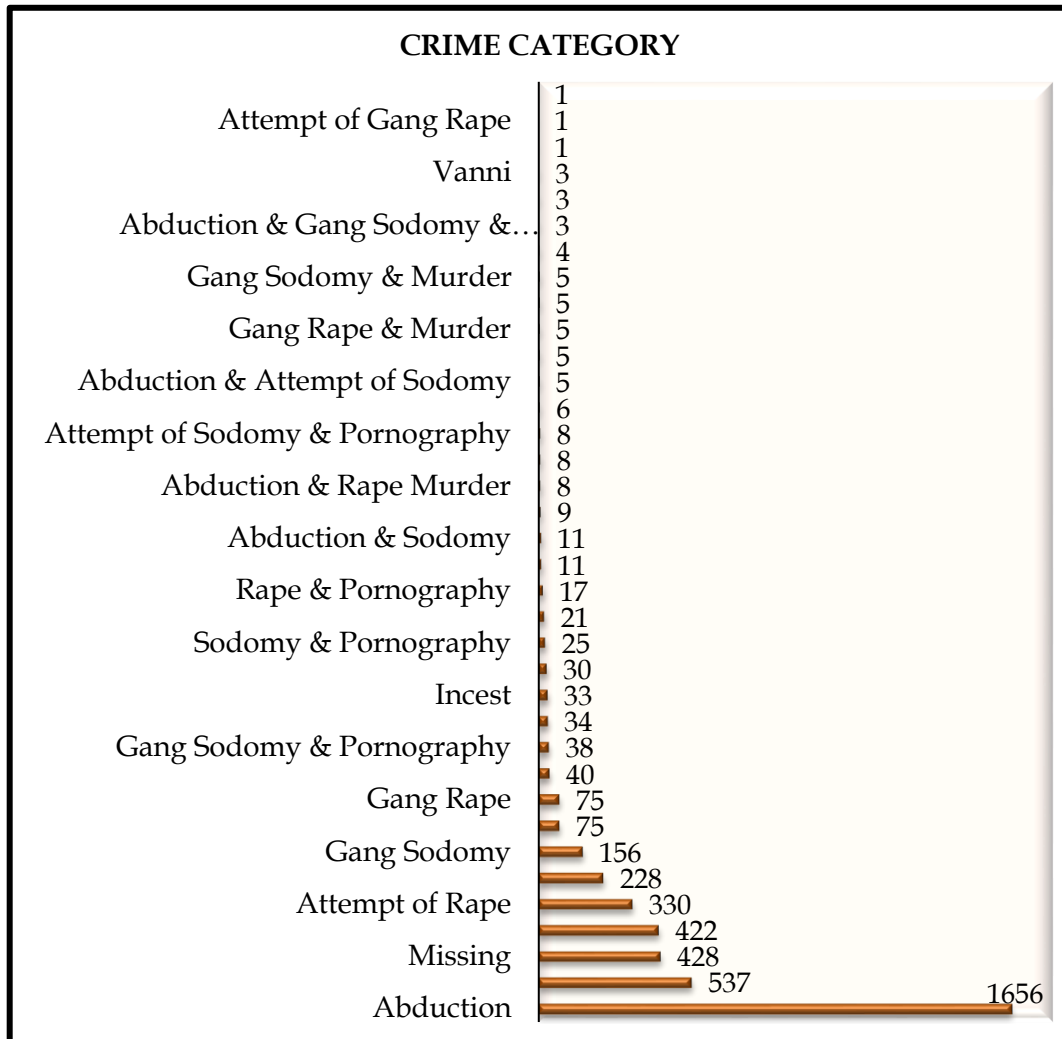


Concerning the final objective of the study, which aims to identify the most prevalent forms of child abuse perpetrated against children, the data drawn from Sahil NGO reveals the following comprehensive statistics:

1. **Child Sexual Abuse:** A total of (2,123) cases were reported, signifying a disturbingly high incidence of sexual abuse against children.

2. **Sodomy:** The data recorded (712) cases of sodomy, which is another profoundly concerning form of child abuse.
3. **Rape:** There were (612) reported cases of rape, highlighting the alarming frequency of this heinous crime against children.
4. **Attempted Child Sexual Abuse:** The study documented (576) cases involving attempted child sexual abuse, further underscoring the vulnerability of children to such atrocities.
5. **Child Sexual Abuse and Pornography:** A total of (109) cases combined child sexual abuse with pornography, indicating a disturbing overlap between these two forms of abuse.
6. **Murder After Sexual Abuse:** Shockingly, (81) cases were reported where children were murdered following sexual abuse, highlighting the tragic and devastating consequences of this form of abuse.
7. **Incest:** In (33) cases, child abuse was reported to involve incest, revealing the bothersome abuse within families.

Moreover, the data also reveals cases of child abduction (1,834) cases, missing children (428) cases, and child marriages (46) cases. These figures provide a comprehensive understanding of the gravity and diversity of child abuse issues that require urgent attention and intervention. Figure (03) presented below provides further information regarding the various types of child maltreatment committed.



Discussion

The substantial increase in child abuse cases, as evidenced by an 11% surge in 2022, raises red flags and underlines the pressing need to tackle this issue head-on. These alarming statistics go beyond mere numbers; they represent a significant threat to the well-being of children, with far-reaching consequences that extend to our social and healthcare systems. First and foremost, this surge in child abuse cases places countless children's safety, physical and psychological well-being, and overall prospects in jeopardy. The fact that child abuse is on the rise is deeply troubling, as it implies that an increasing number of children are experiencing not only the immediate physical and emotional consequences of abuse but also the potential for lasting trauma (Shugart et al., 2010). The effects of abuse can persist throughout a child's life, affecting their emotional and psychological development and their ability to form healthy relationships, succeed in education, and later contribute positively to society.

Furthermore, the escalation of child abuse cases burdens the already overburdened social and healthcare systems. It necessitates increased resources, both in terms of medical care and psychological support, to address the needs of victims (Christian, 2011). These resources are essential not only for treating abuse survivors but also for preventing child abuse. It is essential to recognize that child abuse cases, if left unaddressed, can lead to a cascade of social and healthcare challenges, from mental health issues to potential criminal behavior, perpetuating a cycle of harm within society.

The research findings shed light on a profoundly troubling reality: child abuse knows no age boundaries, transcending the innocence of children as young as 0-5 years. What is particularly unsettling is the sheer number of cases in this age group. This early exposure to abuse has far-reaching consequences, considering the vulnerability of these children and their potential for lasting emotional and psychological trauma (Blaustein, 2013). The study highlights that child abuse extends its malevolent reach into the 6-10 and 11-15 age groups, where its presence is even more pronounced. These age brackets represent a pivotal period in a child's development, where their emotional and psychological well-being can be significantly influenced. Notably, the data reveals that both boys and girls are at risk of abuse. This fact dispels the myth that child abuse is a gender-specific issue and underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing it as a societal problem. However, it is crucial to recognize the persistent gender disparities within these findings. While boys experience higher rates of victimization in certain age groups, girls, as a whole, still bear the brunt of abuse. This gender breakdown is a crucial aspect of the findings. It highlights the vulnerability of both girls' and boys'; emphasizing that child abuse is a pervasive and indiscriminate threat to all children. Approximately 55% of victims are girls, which signify that a significant portion of abuse cases involves female children. These statistics underscore the urgency of implementing measures to safeguard and support the most vulnerable members of society. The research findings underscore the need for comprehensive and gender-inclusive efforts to prevent child abuse. By recognizing that child abuse affects children of all ages and genders (Mehnaz, 2018), we can develop more effective strategies to protect our children from harm and provide them with the support they need to heal and thrive.

Moreover, the data presented in the study vividly illustrates the distressing reality of child abuse in Pakistan, particularly regarding the various forms in which it manifests. It is imperative to recognize the multifaceted nature of child abuse, as understanding its specific forms is crucial for developing effective intervention and support programs. Child sexual abuse is a deeply concerning issue in our country (Imran et al., 2020). The fact that a total of 2,123 cases were reported is alarming. This number signifies a high incidence of sexual abuse against children, an issue that leaves lasting emotional and psychological scars on its victims. Child sexual abuse is not only traumatic in the short term but can also have long-term psychological consequences for the survivors (Batool, 2017). It is a form of abuse that necessitates immediate attention and targeted intervention to support victims and hold perpetrators accountable. Sodomy, with 712 reported cases, stands as another highly distressing form of child abuse. Whereas rape, with 612 reported cases, represents another disconcerting aspect of child abuse. Equally concerning are the 576 cases of attempted child sexual abuse. This category is a stark reminder of the pervasive nature of abuse, as even attempts at child sexual abuse are distressingly common. These figures highlight the vulnerability of children to various forms of sexual exploitation. The co-occurrence of child sexual abuse and pornography, with 109 reported cases, is particularly troubling. This overlap indicates the disturbing intersection of child exploitation and the creation and distribution of explicit materials involving minors (Hasan, 2021). Equally alarming is the data indicating 81 cases of murder after sexual abuse. This shocking statistic highlights the dire consequences that can result from sexual abuse, where the abuse culminates in the tragic loss of life. Such cases underscore the urgency of addressing child abuse to prevent not only the abuse itself but also the potential lethal outcomes. The issue of incest, with 33 reported cases, reveals yet another dimension of child abuse. Incest involves abuse within families and has its own set of complex dynamics.

These cases require specialized attention and support to address their unique challenges.

In the last, the research findings shed light on a critical aspect of the child abuse issue in Pakistan, which is the substantial regional disparity in its prevalence. This aspect underscores the need for nuanced and region-specific approaches to tackle child abuse effectively. As highlighted in the data, Punjab emerges as a concerning hotspot with the highest number of documented child abuse cases. In 2022, 3,035 cases were reported in this province alone. This alarming number warrants closer examination to understand the root causes and dynamics contributing to this prevalence. While the research points to regional disparities, it does not delve into the specific factors or reasons behind these variations. Understanding why certain regions, like Punjab, have disproportionately high reported cases is essential for crafting effective intervention and prevention strategies. Several factors could contribute to these regional differences. Socioeconomic conditions, cultural norms, access to education, awareness levels, and the effectiveness of child protection mechanisms can all influence the prevalence of child abuse in different areas (Naeem et al., 2019). For instance, regions with higher poverty rates or lower access to quality education may experience higher rates of child abuse due to the increased vulnerability of children in such environments.

Additionally, regions with differing cultural norms or attitudes towards child discipline and family dynamics may have varying abuse rates. It is also possible that some regions have more robust reporting mechanisms or awareness campaigns in place, leading to higher rates of reported cases. In contrast, regions with limited awareness or inadequate reporting channels might have lower reported numbers, which may not necessarily reflect the actual prevalence of abuse (Boyden, 2015). To address these disparities, targeted interventions and awareness campaigns should be tailored to meet different regions' specific needs and challenges. This approach acknowledges that a one-size-fits-all strategy may not be effective in a country as diverse as Pakistan. Regional dynamics play a pivotal role in the prevalence of child abuse, and understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing region-specific strategies. This requires collaboration between governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to identify the root causes of abuse in each region and implement preventive measures accordingly (Tripl et al., 2015). These efforts should be multifaceted, focusing on preventing child abuse and providing robust support to victims.

Moreover, prevention strategies should encompass educational initiatives to raise awareness about child abuse, its forms, and the importance of reporting and addressing it. These programs can target schools, communities, and families. In particular, educating parents and caregivers about child abuse and the signs to look out for is crucial in preventing such incidents. Additionally, communities and neighborhoods should foster an environment where children feel safe and empowered to speak out if they are experiencing abuse. The escalating trend of child abuse in Pakistan demands immediate attention and action. Prevention, education, and support are pivotal in addressing this pervasive issue and ensuring a safer, healthier future for Pakistan's children.

Recommendations

Child abuse prevention necessitates a comprehensive approach encompassing all stakeholders, ranging from governmental entities to civil society organizations and

people. The amalgamation of these endeavors mentioned above can contribute to the establishment of a more secure and safeguarded milieu for the children of Pakistan.

- Implement comprehensive awareness campaigns within schools, communities, and the media to educate children, parents, teachers, and the public about child rights, recognizing abuse, and reporting mechanisms.
- Provide training to teachers, healthcare professionals, and law enforcement agencies to equip them with the skills to identify and respond to child abuse effectively.
- Establish accessible and affordable mental health services for victims of child abuse, focusing on their psychological well-being and recovery.
- Implement community-based programs that encourage positive parenting practices, conflict resolution, and alternative disciplinary methods to reduce violence in homes.
- Involve youth in advocacy efforts, ensuring their voices are heard and their concerns addressed in policy and program development.
- Collaborate with international organizations and neighboring countries to combat cross-border issues such as human trafficking and child exploitation.

Conclusion

Child abuse is a global, cross-cultural phenomenon that affects civilizations all over the world. Surprisingly, almost 40 million children are mistreated each year. The increase in child abuse cases projected for 2022 is a significant issue requiring prompt and collaborative action. These realities endanger the health of Pakistani children. Child abuse affects both our social and healthcare systems and its victims. The prevention and treatment of this social issue must be exhaustive and targeted. Child abuse has no age limit, according to research, which is alarming. When they should be protected and cherished, children as young as 0 to 5 are victims, traumatized, and vulnerable. Children ages 6 to 10 and 11 to 15 are at risk of maltreatment, making this a crucial time in their development. The ongoing gender disparities in these findings must be acknowledged. Girls continue to suffer the most harm, emphasizing the need to recognize child abuse as a pervasive issue affecting all children. The secondary data emphasize the horrifying reality of child abuse, which includes sexual abuse, sodomy, rape, attempted abuse, child pornography, murder following sexual abuse, and incest.

Understanding the different varieties of child abuse is crucial for establishing effective intervention and support programs. There are also regional disparities in child maltreatment, with Punjab being an issue. Due to the numerous causes of these geographical differences, region-specific measures are required. This situation necessitates a prompt and comprehensive response from all stakeholders, including the government, NGOs, and Pakistani citizens. Education, awareness, and community engagement should be a part of prevention and support efforts. Education of parents, caregivers, and the community regarding child abuse and its reporting and resolution is essential. We can prevent child abuse and give Pakistan's children a safer, healthier future by empowering them to speak out in a secure environment. Combating child maltreatment is a shared obligation. Society must collaborate to protect the most vulnerable and improve the future of Pakistani children.

References

- Abbas, S. S., & Jabeen, T. (2020). Prevalence of child abuse among the university students: a retrospective cross-sectional study in University of the Punjab, Pakistan. *International quarterly of community health education*, 40(2), 125-134.
- Abbasi, M. A., Saeidi, M., Khademi, G., Hoseini, B. L., & Moghadam, Z. E. (2015). Child maltreatment in the worldwide: A review article. *Int J Pediatr*, 3(1-1), 353-365.
- Abro, S. (2023, August 24). Alarming Rise of Child Abuse in Pakistan. *ARY Network*.
- Ahmad, S., Huifang, W., Akhtar, S., Maqsood, S., & Imran, S. (2020). An analytical study of child labour in the agriculture sector of the rural areas of central Punjab, Pakistan.
- Ali Lakhtar, M. P., Parpio, Y., & Farooq, S. (2017). Surveillance system for child abuse: Bridging the gap between actual and hidden cases. *JPMA. The Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association*, 67(1), 126.
- Almuneef, M., & Al-Eissa, M. (2011). Preventing child abuse and neglect in Saudi Arabia: are we ready?. *Annals of Saudi medicine*, 31(6), 635-640.
- Batool, S., & Abtahi, A. (2017). Psychosocial impact of childhood sexual abuse: Perspective of victims. *Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 36-48.
- Belsky, J. (1984). The determinants of parenting: A process model. *Child development*, 83-96.
- Blaustein, M. E. (2013). Childhood trauma and a framework for intervention. *Supporting and educating traumatized students: A guide for school-based professionals*, 3-21. Oxford University Press.
- Boyden, J. (2015). Childhood and the policy makers: A comparative perspective on the globalization of childhood. In *Constructing and reconstructing childhood*, Routledge.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). Beyond the deficit model in child and family policy. *Teachers College Record*, 81(1), 1-6.
- Brunsdon, J. J., & Walker, D. I. (2022). Cultivating character through physical education using memetic, progressive and transformative practices in schools. *Journal of Moral Education*, 51(4), 477-493.
- Christian, C. W., & Schwarz, D. F. (2011). Child maltreatment and the transition to adult-based medical and mental health care. *Pediatrics*, 127(1), 139-145.
- Farmer, A. (2011). A Commentary on the Committee on the Rights of the Child's Definition of Non-Refoulement for Children: Broad Protection for Fundamental Rights. *Fordham L. Rev. Res Gestae*, 80, 39.
- Flaherty, E. G., Perez-Rossello, J. M., Levine, M. A., Hennrikus, W. L., American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, Section on Radiology, ... & Esposito, P. W. (2014). Evaluating children with fractures for child physical abuse. *Pediatrics*, 133(2), e477-e489.

- Frederico, M. M., Jackson, A. L., & Black, C. M. (2008). Understanding the impact of abuse and neglect on children and young people referred to a therapeutic program. *Journal of family studies*, 14(2-3), 342-362.
- Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., Hanson, E., Whittle, H., Alves-Costa, F., Pintos, A., Metcalf, T., & Beech, A. (2021). Technology assisted child sexual abuse: professionals' perceptions of risk and impact on children and young people. *Child abuse & neglect*, 119, 104651.
- Heim, C., Shugart, M., Craighead, W. E., & Nemeroff, C. B. (2010). Neurobiological and psychiatric consequences of child abuse and neglect. *Developmental psychobiology*, 52(7), 671-690.
- Hyder, A. A., & Malik, F. A. (2007). Violence against children: a challenge for public health in Pakistan. *Journal of health, population, and nutrition*, 25(2), 168.
- Imran, N., Zeshan, M., & Pervaiz, Z. (2020). Mental health considerations for children & adolescents in COVID-19 Pandemic. *Pakistan journal of medical sciences*, 36(COVID19-S4), S67.
- Joelsson, P., Chudal, R., Uotila, J., Suominen, A., Sucksdorff, D., Gyllenberg, D., & Sourander, A. (2017). Parental psychopathology and offspring attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in a nationwide sample. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 94, 124-130.
- Khan, I., Iftikhar, A., Raza, A., & Marri, S. A. (2022). Anti-Terrorism Law and Policy in Pakistan. *Competitive Education Research Journal*, 3(2), 48-63.
- Khand, S. (2023, April 12). Child abuse in Pakistan. *The Nation*
- Kimber, M., McTavish, J. R., Couturier, J., Boven, A., Gill, S., Dimitropoulos, G., & MacMillan, H. L. (2017). Consequences of child emotional abuse, emotional neglect and exposure to intimate partner violence for eating disorders: a systematic critical review. *BMC psychology*, 5(1), 1-18.
- Lakhtdir, M. P. A., Nathwani, A. A., Ali, N. A., Farooq, S., Azam, S. I., Khaliq, A., & Kadir, M. M. (2019). Intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment: Predictors of child emotional maltreatment among 11 to 17 years old children residing in communities of Karachi, Pakistan. *Child abuse & neglect*, 91, 109-115.
- Leeb, R. T., Lewis, T., & Zolotor, A. J. (2011). A review of physical and mental health consequences of child abuse and neglect and implications for practice. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 5(5), 454-468.
- Letourneau, E. J., Eaton, W. W., Bass, J., Berlin, F. S., & Moore, S. G. (2014). The need for a comprehensive public health approach to preventing child sexual abuse. Sage Journals.
- Mahrous, E., Abd Elazem, S., & Hassan, Z. (2016). Prevalence of child abuse and its long-term psychological consequences among female students of medical faculties. *Int J Sci Res*, 5(10).
- Maul, K. M., Naeem, R., Khan, U. R., Mian, A. I., Yousafzai, A. K., & Brown, N. (2019). Child abuse in Pakistan: A qualitative study of knowledge, attitudes and practice amongst health professionals. *Child abuse & neglect*, 88, 51-57.

- Mehnaz, A. (2018). Child abuse in Pakistan-current perspective. *National Journal of Health Sciences*, 3(4), 114-117.
- Mirza, M. A. (2010). The menace of human trafficking-Pakistan's response to the problem. *Pakistan Journal of Criminology*, 2(4), 151-164.
- National Research Council. (2014). New directions in child abuse and neglect research.
- Rosen, N. G., Escobar Jr, M. A., Brown, C. V., Moore, E. E., Sava, J. A., Peck, K., ... & Martin, M. J. (2021). Child physical abuse trauma evaluation and management: a Western Trauma Association and Pediatric Trauma Society critical decisions algorithm. *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery*, 90(4), 641-651.
- Sahil NGO. (2022). *Cruel Numbers: A Compilation Of Statistics On Child Sexual Abuse Reported Cases In Pakistan*. Report 2022.
- Sarsour, K., Sheridan, M., Jutte, D., Nuru-Jeter, A., Hinshaw, S., & Boyce, W. T. (2011). Family socioeconomic status and child executive functions: The roles of language, home environment, and single parenthood. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*, 17(1), 120-132.
- Siegel, J. P. (2013). Breaking the links in intergenerational violence: An emotional regulation perspective. *Family process*, 52(2), 163-178.
- Stoltenborgh, M., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Alink, L. R., & Van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (2012). The universality of childhood emotional abuse: a meta-analysis of worldwide prevalence. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 21(8), 870-890.
- Trippel, M., Grillitsch, M., Isaksen, A., & Sinozic, T. (2015). Perspectives on cluster evolution: critical review and future research issues. *European planning studies*, 23(10), 2028-2044.
- Unicef. (2020). Action to end child sexual abuse and exploitation: a review of the evidence 2020.
- Unicef. (2020). Global status report on preventing violence against children 2020.
- UNICEF. (2023). Gender Equality: Global Annual Results Report 2022.