



RESEARCH PAPER

Child Abuse Trauma and Criminal Behavior: Legislative Gaps and Preventive Measures in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between childhood abuse and the likelihood of engaging in criminal or delinquent behavior in adulthood. It also evaluates Pakistan's legislative framework for child protection, highlighting gaps and inconsistencies, and proposes actionable recommendations to address these issues. The research employs a qualitative review based on interview questionnaires and legal documents, alongside empirical analysis, to explore the association between early trauma and criminal behavior. The legislative framework was designed to identify problems in definitions, preventive measures, and victim support systems. Findings reveal a strong link between childhood maltreatment and criminal tendencies in adulthood. Key issues include ambiguous definitions of child abuse, insufficient counseling provisions, and legislative inconsistencies, particularly concerning the age of majority. Routine disciplinary practices often overlap with abusive behaviors, further complicating child protection efforts. The study emphasizes the need for standardized definitions of child abuse, implementation of trauma counseling regulations, enhanced public awareness campaigns, and comprehensive rehabilitation programs to support victims and prevent recidivism.

KEYWORDS Child abuse, Counselling, Criminal behavior, Delinquency, Legislation

Introduction

Child abuse remains a grave societal issue, leaving enduring scars on individuals and communities. Broadly, child abuse encompasses acts of commission or omission that jeopardize a child's physical, emotional, or psychological development. These acts may include harmful environments, physical violence, neglect, and emotional or sexual abuse, all of which impede a child's ability to realize their innate potential. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), child abuse includes any action or failure to act that results in harm or poses a risk to a child's health, survival, or dignity within a framework of trust or responsibility. Globally, the prevalence of child abuse is alarming, with millions of children subjected to physical, emotional, or sexual harm annually.

Childhood abuse is a profound and multifaceted issue that has significant implications for individual well-being and societal stability. The tragic case of Abhan, an eight-year-old boy brutally murdered by his cousin in February 2024, underscores the far-reaching consequences of childhood maltreatment and its potential to incite delinquent behavior (Salman, 2024). Such incidents highlight the urgent need to investigate the relationship between childhood abuse and behavioral outcomes, particularly delinquency and criminality, to prevent similar tragedies. Evidence suggests

that childhood maltreatment, physical, emotional, or sexual, leads to maladaptive coping mechanisms, emotional dysregulation, and psychological trauma, which increase the likelihood of engaging in delinquent behavior (Diaz et al., 2020). Further, it indicates that abuse affects brain development and social bonding, exacerbating risks of maladaptive outcomes. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to delinquent behavior and the development of effective preventive and rehabilitative strategies.

Despite global efforts to address child abuse, the situation remains alarming. Millions of children globally experience various forms of abuse, with devastating consequences for their health, development, and safety (WHO, 2022). In Pakistan, child abuse is a pervasive issue, with physical neglect, abuse, and emotional maltreatment being the most common forms (Mehnaz, 2018). In Pakistan, child abuse takes various forms, including physical neglect (64.1%), physical abuse (16%), sexual abuse (8.8%), and emotional neglect (6.6%). Research indicates that the perpetrators are parents or guardians in approximately 80% of cases. Despite this prevalence, there is a shortage of literature on child safety and the legislative measures addressing these issues in Pakistan. Internationally, studies demonstrate a strong correlation between childhood abuse and later behavioral problems, including delinquency and criminal behavior. Individuals subjected to abuse during their formative years are more likely to develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, emotional dysregulation, and social difficulties, increasing their propensity for delinquent behaviors. The absence of effective legislative mechanisms and the lack of standard therapeutic interventions exacerbate the issue, leaving victims vulnerable to adverse outcomes, including delinquency. The lack of recent studies in Pakistan on child abuse and its linkage to delinquent behavior underscores the need for focused research to inform policy reforms and interventions.

The relationship between child abuse and delinquent behavior is complex and influenced by various factors, such as the severity and duration of the abuse, availability of support systems, and individual resilience. Abuse-related trauma can result in psychological issues like anger, impulsivity, and challenges in forming healthy relationships, which may predispose individuals to criminal activities. Furthermore, childhood maltreatment negatively affects brain development and social bonding, further exacerbating the risk of delinquency.

Pakistan's legal framework, including conventions and acts such as the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), Sindh Child Protection Authority Act (SCPA), and Juvenile Justice System Act (JJSA), aims to address child abuse. However, inconsistencies and inadequacies in these laws hinder effective intervention and prevention. The absence of standardized definitions of child abuse, lack of counseling regulations for victims, and gaps in enforcement further contribute to the problem.

This research investigates the correlation between childhood abuse and delinquent behavior in Pakistan. It critically examines the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and explores the need for reforms, including standardizing counseling and therapy for victims. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to propose actionable recommendations for strengthening child protection systems, reducing abuse, and fostering healthier outcomes for survivors.

The findings will have significant implications for policymakers, legal authorities, and practitioners, offering insights to develop comprehensive interventions that prevent abuse, address its consequences, and promote the well-being of children. The study's

structure includes a literature review in 2nd session, methodology in 3rd session, results and discussion in 4th session, and 5th session is about conclusion with recommendations.

Literature Review

Child abuse is a worldwide issue that affects all cultures and socioeconomic classes. For victims, the consequences may be significant and life-changing. There is extensive literature on symptoms of child abuse from first-world countries, but data are scarce from developing countries like Pakistan. In Pakistan, an unfortunate number of cases have shown that children are subject to a wide range of types of violence "(physical, psychological, and sexual)" and exploitation, including economic exploitation and child trafficking (Toth and Manly 2019). Despite Pakistan's ratification of the UNCRC, "no publicly coordinated child protection case management and referral system compatible with international norms has been developed."

The effects of child labor are usually obscured from the public's gaze, even though half of all children worldwide are exposed to violence and the trauma that survivors endure. The threat of child abuse has overtaken Pakistan, yet little is known about this profoundly ingrained problem. Long-term detrimental effects of adversity throughout childhood, such as abuse or deprivation from love, have been documented by many researchers. It will be necessary to comprehend child abuse. It has been connected to early mortality, chronic illnesses, and premature aging. "In Pakistan, child abuse is a common occurrence but is rarely acknowledged as a social issue (Hussain, 2022; Chandio et al., 2024)

There are several types of abuse. Physical abuse, which includes corporeal punishment, is perhaps the most common. In order to uphold discipline, parents and educators may resort to using physical force. In Pakistan, this is typical regardless of the setting of a madrassah, a school, or a residence. Physical abuse victims are unable to grow naturally because they have to put in extra effort to avoid getting in trouble with their parents or school (Nekokara 2021).

Emotional abuse, or psychological mistreatment that impedes children's normal mental and social development, is the second most common type of child abuse in Pakistan. Emotional abuse can take several forms, including persistently degrading the child, threatening or frightening the child, harsh criticism, using derogatory language, and isolating the child from their friends or other children their age. A cross-sectional study by Abbas & Jabeen (2020) shows that about 53% of the children in Pakistan go through some emotional abuse, with a higher percentage of female victims at 54 percent, than male victims at 53 percent. Additionally, the survey reveals that around 40% of kids experience parental or caregiver neglect. The effects of neglect on a child's mental development are extensive. Physical, medical, emotional, and educational neglect are all forms.

The most heinous kind of abuse, that is, sexual abuse, unfortunately, has been ever-increasing in Pakistani society. This includes pressuring children to engage in sexual activity, exposing them to pornographic material, and exposing them to private parts/sexual parts. The "International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse (ISPCAN)" reports that 41.69 percent of the participants have admitted to having experienced some sexual abuse in the past. Boys report experiencing child maltreatment more often than girls do (Hussain, 2022). Unfortunately, there has been an alarmingly high rate of reported cases regarding sexual abuse of minors in the last decade. These children will be traumatized physically, emotionally, and sexually for the rest of their

lives as a result of this abuse. Despite the vast number of recorded incidents drawing public attention, child abuse continues to be overlooked in Pakistan unless the case gains public attention through social media or news outlets.

An example of this would be the famous Zainab murder case of Kasurm (BBC 2018). Before the "Zainab case", child sexual abuse was a common occurrence but seldom documented. The distinctive aspect of Zainab's case is that it spurred a public discussion. The Zainab case highlighted how urgent it is to stop the threat of child abuse. Under criticism from the public, the government pledged strict measures, including legislation and police training. However, the efforts seem to be counterintuitive, as the ever-growing cases reported by the NGO Sahil show that there has been a 4% increase in cases of sexual abuse (Sahil 2023).

Without a doubt, every child deserves a safe upbringing, and this is a goal that may be attained. The moment to protect the kids from this horrible mistreatment is now. Inviting children to open up and communicate is essential since they often suffer in quiet. Giving the child the ability to express their emotions without fear is necessary. However, there are specific barriers to solving the issues. Abusers, in most cases, are socially isolated and are unable to conform to ethical standards and cultural norms due to a lack of social awareness (Nekokara 2021). Social interactions are a natural place for learning and growth. People without social networks remain rigid and unchanging with their family members. In addition to this, victims may often feel alone and reluctant to communicate about their experiences because they have not received enough support from friends, family, neighbors, or the community and because parents do not want to put their children through the medico-legal system.

Furthermore, there is no mandated reporting by the healthcare workers. Since the legal system in Pakistan does not require healthcare workers to retain possibly abused minor patients in their care, they become limited in their capacity to advocate for and ensure the safety of both the identified children and themselves (Premani 2021). Healthcare workers can detect abuse early, but in Pakistan, there are several difficulties (Akbaba et al., 2020). Healthcare workers need training, clear institutional structures, and legal backing to take on this duty.

Prior research on the developmental consequences of "child maltreatment" has shown impulsivity as a substantial risk "factor for criminal conduct". According to the literature, many good personality qualities are difficult to develop for maltreatment victims who frequently live in turbulent and dangerous caregiving contexts (Anjum and Bano, 2028). Child abuse can severely influence an individual's development and increase the risk of future involvement in crime. When a child witnesses violent acts, the likelihood that they would use significant violence in the years that follow is almost doubled. According to a report by Leeb et al. (2008), those who were abused as children are more likely to develop mental health difficulties, substance misuse, and social problems, all of which increase the risk of engaging in criminal conduct.

The influence of early trauma on brain development may be one reason for the connection between adult criminal participation and the mistreatment of children. Traumatic experiences such as abuse or neglect can interfere with a child's normal brain development, resulting in behavioral and mental health issues that may increase the child's likelihood of engaging in criminal activity later in life. Children who were abused or neglected in their childhood are expected to end up being arrested in their adult life or adult life. Early initiation of illegal activities can negatively affect the human capital in legitimate fields like education or employment while increasing the unlawful human

capital by gaining more experience in criminal activity. This would make criminal tendencies more prevalent (Anjum and Bano 2018).

The idea that child abuse might result in social and economic disadvantages that raise the likelihood of criminal activity is another argument. Children who are abused or neglected, for instance, may find it challenging to learn or build healthy connections, which can result in social isolation and a higher chance of being involved in criminal activity. Numerous empirical investigations conducted in the West have discovered that a significant proportion of juvenile offenders have been victims of child abuse. For instance, a high percentage of young criminals (between 60% and 90%) stated that they had experienced at least one form of child maltreatment, such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or neglect Kowalski 2019 and (Tunio 2024)

Numerous studies have found that childhood abuse enhances a person's chances of being involved in crime later in life. Many longitudinal research studies suggest that maltreated children are 2 to 6 times more likely than non-maltreated adolescents to acquire criminal conduct in young adulthood. The authors of a longitudinal, well-structured survey of at-risk youth that was led by Shin et al. (2016) discovered that child maltreatment was associated with a 2.24-fold (odds ratio) increased arrest risk as well as was linked to a 1.75-fold and 2.03-fold increase in general offending and violence offending.

Because abuse generates a high level of stress, it can interfere with a child's brain's healthy development. According to the WHO (2022), such stress might harm a child's neurological and immune system development. As a result, "survivors of childhood maltreatment" are more likely to develop physical and mental health issues. Aside from death or significant bodily harm, children who are abused are at risk for a variety of other problems. Abuse has an influence that reaches beyond the particular kid. Abuse sends terrible waves throughout the family and can prevent healthy ties from forming. It can give youngsters a negative view of family life, which they may carry into their households.

Abuse in childhood has both mental and emotional impacts. Abused children are more prone to develop anxiety, sadness, and memory problems. Children may block out traumatic memories. This can sometimes result in memory problems and other concerns that impact areas of life other than the abuse. Shame and guilt are common outcomes, with youngsters sometimes blaming themselves for the circumstance or considering themselves flawed. Children who are subjected to any maltreatment are more likely to participate in smoking, drinking, and drug usage as adults. Substance abuse raises their chances of overdose, addiction, health issues, and engaging in abusive behaviors in their own families later in life (Jalil 2022).

Child maltreatment has been linked to an increased predisposition for hazardous conduct, according to research. Risky sexual habits might fall under this category. Abuse, on the other hand, has been related to an increase in different sorts of risk-taking behavior. For instance, a 2020 research on adolescent and young adult girls showed a correlation between childhood neglect and antisocial behaviors, such as lying, stealing, trespassing, vandalism (e.g., graffiti), and physical fights (Diaz et al. 2020).

There are various examples of laws in other countries that have tried to prevent child abuse and enforce therapy and counselling for the victims. For example, the "CPS (Child Protective Services)" is the primary institute for the intervention and handling of child abuse and neglect cases in the United States. CPS may also put a child in foster care

services when the kid has to be taken from the home and put with family members or other caregivers, or in-home family services when the child stays at home and receives assistance like counseling, treatment for mental health issues and drug misuse, and other services. In addition, legal actions pertaining to the child's custody may occur. In addition, all states have laws requiring medical professionals, other healthcare providers, and other occupations working with children to report suspected "cases of child abuse and neglect" to "Child Protective Services (CPS)". Pediatricians, family doctors, and other primary care providers are in a good position to identify children who are being abused or neglected during well-child and other visits; CPS may provide preventative interventions to high-risk families to help parents better understand child development and parenting strategies; in addition, post-investigation assistance for verified cases is based on the family's evaluation (Palmer et al., 2022). The research gap lies in the limited exploration of the link between child abuse and delinquent behavior within Pakistan's socio-cultural and legal context. Additionally, the effectiveness of child protection laws and rehabilitative services remains under-examined, necessitating localized studies to develop contextually relevant interventions and policies for preventing abuse and addressing its consequences.

Research Methodology

The research employed a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect data from 10 participants in Sindh. Participants included police officers, law experts (judges and lawyers), child protection authorities, and representatives from NGOs, all of whom had direct exposure to child abuse cases. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure representation from relevant fields, with participants selected based on their roles in addressing child abuse. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, with 10-12 questions asked per session. To maintain confidentiality, each interviewee was assigned a code. Ethical considerations were carefully observed; participants provided informed consent, no personal or harmful questions were asked, and all identities remained confidential. The recorded interviews were exclusively used for research purposes and accessed only by the researchers. Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the collected data.

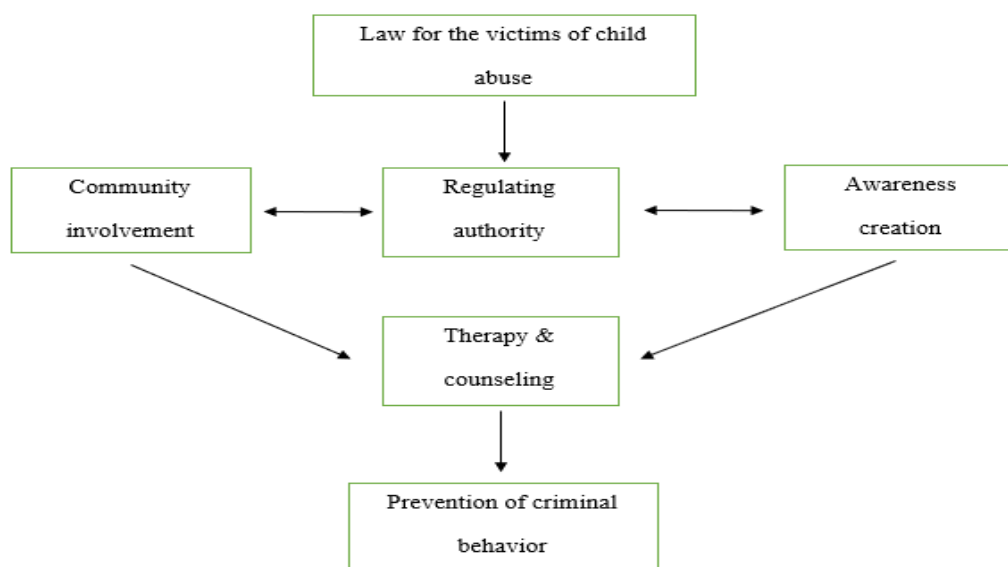


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Laws addressing child abuse and victim support in Pakistan include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973), the Pakistan Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860), the Sindh Child Protection Authority Act (2011), and the Juvenile Justice System Act (2018). Regulating authorities, such as the Women and Children Protection Cell in Sindh, play a pivotal role in handling child abuse cases by facilitating protection and providing an online complaint portal. Public awareness, encompassing knowledge about child abuse and its implications, is essential for prevention, while community involvement—through schools, teachers, healthcare professionals, and parental figures—further supports child protection efforts. Additionally, therapy and counseling services are crucial for treating the trauma experienced by victims, helping them recover and reintegrate into society.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this research study are based on participants' individual experiences, with each interview transcribed and meticulously analyzed line by line, resulting in six key themes. A coding table was developed based on the study's research questions, and confidentiality was maintained by assigning codes to each participant, along with numbers corresponding to their department or occupation. Participants were purposively selected from relevant departments based on their roles in addressing child abuse cases within the legal framework.

Nine participants indicated that childhood abuse often leads to delinquent behavior in adolescence and criminal tendencies in adulthood, with childhood trauma manifesting in later criminal acts. One participant highlighted the potential benefits of therapeutic interventions such as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), play therapy, and family therapy. These treatments must be tailored to the victim's age, the type and severity of the abuse, and their symptoms and needs.

Seven participants discussed the shortcomings of current legislation and its effectiveness in protecting children and victims of abuse. Key issues include a lack of mandated reporting, especially by healthcare providers, and the absence of a standardized definition of child abuse encompassing all forms of abuse, which hinders early detection. Five participants emphasized that the legal system's inconsistencies often result in unequal access to support, leaving many victims without assistance. One participant noted the absence of proper counseling for families to help abused children, with support often limited to certain NGOs and inadequate follow-ups.

All participants agreed that legal system gaps and inconsistencies exacerbate the issue. Three participants suggested that individuals handling child abuse cases should undergo empathy and psychological testing to ensure they approach these cases with the necessary sensitivity. Five participants pointed to the lack of specialized courts, rehabilitation centers, and insufficient forensic labs and DNA testing facilities. One participant recommended establishing a single, nationwide helpline for child abuse cases to ensure accessibility and ease of use, allowing even young children to seek help independently.

Child abuse and maltreatment are pervasive issues worldwide, with far-reaching implications for the well-being of children and society. In Pakistan, children frequently face severe physical mistreatment, including beatings, burns, fractures, attempted suffocation, and drug use as forms of discipline, often perpetuated by parents, teachers, or relatives (WHO, 2022). Cultural norms, particularly the acceptance of corporal

punishment as a disciplinary tool, exacerbate the problem, with many parents explicitly permitting teachers or caregivers to discipline their children through physical means. This practice is especially prevalent in institutions such as madrassas, raising significant concerns about child safety and well-being.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable, as evidenced by 4,139 documented cases of abuse in homes or workplaces in 2006, with 11 new cases reported daily (Gilani, 2022). Furthermore, the 1996 National Child Survey highlighted that over 3.3 million children were unknowingly engaged in child labor (Zafar, 2016). Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are often sent to work for wealthier families, where they have little choice but to endure harsh conditions.

The results of this study indicate a significant correlation between childhood abuse and a heightened inclination toward risky and delinquent behaviors. Abuse has been linked to a range of adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and memory issues, which can impair social bonding and brain development. The long-term effects of such maltreatment often extend beyond childhood, increasing the likelihood of substance abuse, which in turn correlates with criminal behavior. For instance, children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to perpetuate similar behaviors in adulthood, either by engaging in violence themselves or by experiencing it within their families.

The relationship between childhood abuse and delinquency is complex and influenced by factors such as the severity and duration of abuse, the presence of supportive networks, and individual resilience. Understanding this connection is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems that mitigate the risks associated with childhood maltreatment and promote positive outcomes for affected individuals.

Are the existing laws in Pakistan comprehensive and effective in the prevention and intervention of child abuse?

Due to the increasing cases of child abuse, a governing body formed to encounter child welfare was formed in 1979, namely the NCCWD. It is housed under the "Ministry of Human Rights". Furthermore, Pakistan ratified the "UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990", giving momentum to the formation of legal instruments safeguarding the rights of children. For instance, the Child Protection Courts in Punjab play a key role in the prevention of child abuse. In Sindh, the main legislation is the Sindh Child Protection Authority Act 2011. In addition, in 2016, PPC was changed to confront the issue of child sexual abuse in the nation. Changes included the minimum age of criminal responsibility rise from 7-10 years and "child pornography" and a section connected with children's exposure to seduction. "Police personnel are usually unaware of legislative improvements and are perplexed by the recent PPC modifications or any Act about rape offenses."

Legal measures such as the Sindh Prohibition of Employment Children Act, the Employment of Children Act 1991, and the "Baluchistan Child Protection Act" restrict the employment of minors below a specific age, hence protecting against child exploitation in the workforce. Aiming to stop harmful practices like child marriage and the pledging of child labor, which can expose children to abuse and exploitation, laws like the Children (Pledging of Labor) Act of 1933 and the Child Marriage Restriction Act of 1929 have been passed.

The JJSO provides that "no child shall be [...] handcuffed, put in fetters or given any corporal punishment at any time while in custody". Just like the other laws, this ordinance also has a detailed description of what defines torture. The psychological aspect of torture is also clearly ignored, which is just one of the examples. The JJSO also grants special treatment for children 15 years old and below. "It states that, if arrested for an offense punishable with imprisonment of ten years or less, the child under 15 years shall be treated as if he was accused of commission of a bailable offense." This legislation establishes specific legal guidelines for managing cases involving minors, guaranteeing that these victims receive compassionate treatment and are not unnecessarily prosecuted for actions stemming from their mistreatment. Furthermore, to protect children's physical and mental health, the Constitution forbids the torture of minors.

According to most participants, Pakistan's law is arguably comprehensive. However, the question arises regarding the effectiveness and implementation of these laws. A study that a non-governmental organization performed recently shows that the main factor for about 35000 pupils leaving school is the fact that they have been subjected to violent punishment in the classroom (Manzoor, 2022). A study by NGO Sahil (2023) indicates that a total number of 4253 cases were registered under "child sexual abuse (CSA)", "abduction", and "missing children and child marriages". The data indicates that at least 13 children are being abused daily in 2022. It is evident that out of the total reported cases of child abuse, 2325 (55%) of the victims were girls and 1928 (45%) were boys. The report by Sahil (2023) also concludes that an increase of 33% has occurred in child abuse cases across the country since 2022. This is a testament that the laws may not be as effective and comprehensive in treating the issue (Muzaffar, et. al. 2018).

There are also quite the gaps in laws. An example would be the case of a missing child called Arzoo. In the Arzoo case, the "Sindh High Court" ordered an NGO called "Pannah Shelter Home" to care for the youngster (Syed 2020). According to the legislation, the CPA officer is responsible for taking custody to the nearest "Child Protection Institution". However, it was discovered that there are no such shelter houses under the supervision of a CPA, hence the referral to an NGO.

The "Sindh government" has earmarked around "100 million" in 2020 to construct DNA lab facilities to handle criminal investigations, rape cases, and terrorism operations. Until now, only two facilities have been built, one in Karachi and the other in Jamshoro. According to the law, medical examination for rape cases must be completed in no more than 6 hours. In most rape cases, however, the medical investigation lasts longer than 72 hours. This is because the victim must go to another city or area, which sometimes takes more than 50 kilometers (Rafiq and Abdullah). "The lack of accessible DNA facilities, especially in remote districts, poses a significant challenge in gathering crucial evidence."

Another gap in the law includes the lack of training of medical staff, police officers, public prosecutors, and even judges to handle cases of child abuse with sensitivity. "The enactment of the Zainab Alert and Response Act in 2019 aimed to expedite the filing of FIRs by mandating that SHOs launch investigations within two hours. However, the lack of trials against any SHO for non-compliance underscores the institutional challenges and the lack of seriousness in enforcing such legislation."

Thus, without a competent and responsible police force, sufficiently staffed probation departments, judges knowledgeable about domestic and international law, and facilities intended to supervise and care for young offenders, even a well-drafted law is unlikely to accomplish its goals.

Is it necessary to reform the current legal system for the protection of children and the provision of standard counseling for victims of child abuse?

Despite a large number of laws geared towards the protection of children, there is no specific framework or federal legislation regarding child abuse and help for the victims. More so, the victims of child abuse may grow up to develop criminal behavior, and rehabilitation of such individuals is crucial. The JJSO provides a framework to rehabilitate these individuals. However, there are not many laws available for the counseling of victims of child abuse, who may develop criminal or delinquent behavior later on in life. Furthermore, there are various inconsistencies within the laws. "(...) issue is the inconsistency in the definition of the uniform age of children across different laws, creating confusion and ambiguity."

The first issue is that no uniform definition of 'child' exists. However, in the official UN report (Berti, 2003), it is stated that despite the general provision given by the "Majority Act, 1975", which assigns the meaning of child as the one who has not attained even the age of 18 years, the meaning of the word "child" and fixation of minimum wage for the work carried out in some of the laws are not clear. Also, the World Organisation Against Torture opposes the discrimination practiced by some written directives on criminal Islamic law via their definition of the female majority at 16 or upon reaching puberty as opposed to the male majority at 18 or puberty. These laws are certainly part of interpreting and discriminating; thus, they go against the spirit of the Convention. Pakistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Still, it has not ratified the optional protocol on child complaints, indicating a gap in its commitment to fully safeguarding children's rights."

Section 82 of the Penal Code establishes the minimum age of criminal responsibility at seven years. "Section 83 declares that between seven and 12 years, a child can only commit an offense when he has attained sufficient understanding to judge the nature and the consequences of his conduct". The JJSO further guarantees special protection to all youth offenders, defined as persons under 18 years. Pakistani laws do not criminalize marital rape of a girl over 12.

"The Children (Pledging of Labour) Act, 1933" considers a child as a person under 15 years and makes any contract to pledge the labor of a child null and void. "Article 11 (3) of the Constitution of 1973" sets below the age of 14 as the minimum working in any hazardous employment. By the "Employment of Children Act 1991," child labour is regulated under 14 years of age and prohibited from working in harsh occupations. However, many different types of abuse are not defined, such as forced begging, witnessing violence, and drug abuse. "The absence of anti-beggary laws leaves many children vulnerable to exploitation through begging."

UNHCR report has stated that unless one standard legal age is defined by federal law, it is almost impossible to implement UNCRC. Furthermore, most laws concentrate on protecting victims and punishing offenders; there aren't many that specifically require rehabilitation or counseling for those who have been the victims of child abuse. Nonetheless, organizations such as the "National Commission on the Rights of Child" might endeavor to offer victim support services, such as therapy and recovery initiatives. Perhaps a more thorough approach to meeting the psychological and emotional needs of victims of child abuse is what these laws lack. Legal protection is essential, but it's also important to make sure victims get the proper treatment and support to get past their trauma and stop committing crimes in the future. The efficacy of current legislation in preventing victimization from causing additional harm could be improved by initiatives

to bolster rehabilitation programs and support services for victims of child abuse. Thus, there is a strong need for legal reform to provide minimum standards.

Conclusion

This study, based on the individual experiences of participants from Sindh, utilized thematic analysis to uncover the dynamics of child abuse in Pakistan while maintaining participant confidentiality. Using a purposive sampling method, individuals from various departments were selected based on their roles in addressing child abuse within legal frameworks. The findings indicate that childhood trauma significantly contributes to delinquent behavior. Most respondents emphasized the vagueness and inadequacy of Pakistan's current child abuse prevention laws.

The study also revealed inconsistencies in legal definitions, particularly regarding the age of majority, which varies across different legislations. Furthermore, there are no laws mandating counseling support for child abuse victims, which perpetuates trauma and its potential consequences. A lack of standardized definitions of child abuse aligned with international standards was noted, alongside limited public awareness of the various forms of abuse. Disciplinary practices employed by parents and teachers often fall under the UNHCR's definitions of child abuse. Additionally, Pakistan lacks sufficient rehabilitation centers and emergency helplines to support child abuse victims effectively.

Recommendations

The study highlights the need for immediate policy reforms and practical measures to address child abuse and its link to delinquent behavior in Pakistan. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Establishment of Counseling Frameworks: Introduce laws mandating counseling support for child abuse victims to prevent delinquent behavior and criminal tendencies. Set up counseling centers at the national and provincial levels to provide accessible, confidential, and cost-effective therapy for victims. Ensure counselors receive specialized training in handling child abuse cases and trauma recovery.

Standardization of Child Abuse Definitions: Legislate a standard definition of child and child abuse, aligned with international norms, to ensure consistency across laws. Launch awareness campaigns for parents, teachers, and communities to educate them on the definition and forms of child abuse, fostering proactive protection of children.

Child Protection Infrastructure: Establish child protection centers equipped with helplines and trained therapists in every district to provide immediate support for victims. Allocate government funds to build infrastructure, hire qualified staff, and sustain these centers as part of the national budget plan.

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