



## Child Sexual Abuse In and Out of Schools in Pakistan. How the Government must Respond Preemptively

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**Abstract:** *This paper is about the issue of child sexual abuse in Pakistan in and out of schools and how a school-based preventive program can help contain this problem in the longer run. As the issue has taken a more serious turn in recent years, with the number of victims rising sharply every year, the government is advised to adopt a preemptive approach and devise comprehensive school-based programs. For this purpose, lessons may be learnt from the US being a country that first launched child protection programs in schools. This article first talks in detail about the issue of child sexual abuse and makes certain recommendations as to how to deal with it in the longer run. In the course of this article, secondary sources of data were consulted. Books, articles and newspaper stories and other collectable materials were consulted to have a better understanding of the issue and how to address it effectively.*

**Key Words:** Child Sexual Abuse, School-Based Programs, Teachers, Students, Parents

### Introduction

Child sexual abuse has won renewed attention from academicians, policymakers and social scientists in the recent past, not only in Pakistan but all over the world. The reason is that the issue has grown in scale and magnitude and is feared to take deep roots if timely remedial measures are not introduced. Importantly, a sharp rise has been witnessed in the number of those who come across sexual abuse. In other words, the issue at hand can no more be denied or ignored. The seriousness of the issue can be realized from a recent report which states that well over 770,000 children are subject to sexual harassment and abuse every year around the world. (Committee for Children, 2014). Of those victimized, reports suggest that 10% to 20% are female while 5% to 10% are male children (Zwi, 2003). The authenticity of these figures can be challenged as the possibility can't be denied that kids who suffer may not disclose their victimization or may go unreported. So, there is a strong likelihood that these data may underestimate the factual realities on the ground.

Ironically, those who experience sexual maltreatment in society are exposed to a number of short and long term negative consequences in future, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, antisocial and suicidal behaviors, eating disorders, alcohol and substance abuse, post-partum depression and parenting difficulties, sexual re-victimization, and sexual dysfunction (Zwi, 2003). Along with the emotional and physical consequences of child maltreatment to victims and their families, there is a substantial economic cost to society, too (PENDARVIS & SHOOK, 2017).

Although the issue of unwanted child sex abuse is hot, there is hardly any universally agreed-upon definition. Various concepts or words have been used for child sexual abuse in the existing literature, such as child sexual assault, child sexual victimization, child sexual exploitation, adverse sexual experiences, and unwanted sexual experiences (Methews & Vézina, 2017). However, what may be

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understood from child sex abuse in common parlance is that it is 'the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society' [\(WHO, 1999\)](#). Although the definition may be clear and comprehensive, the matter is not that simple. For instance, child sex abuse can be inflicted by an adult only? Is it inflicted only when sexual/physical contact is made? These are questions that need further explanations and exploitations.

Though unwanted child sex abuse is prevalent everywhere (Methews & Vézina, 2017), the issue is more acute in societies rooted in tribal and traditional societal norms and values. Pakistan is one such example where child sexual abuse has become a matter of routine. Although it was Zainab, a minor girl from Kasur, whose brutal murder after being raped brought the issue of child sexual abuse into the limelight in print and electronic media, statistics from various authentic sources indicate that the issue had been in existence for last many years but went unnoticed or unreported. According to a report from the Ministry of Human Rights, as many as 17 862 cases of child abuse have been reported in the country since 2013. Of those reported, 10,620 were girls, whereas the victims in the rest of 7,242 cases were boys [\(Haq, 2018\)](#).

Though data has yet to be compiled comprehensively on CSA, available findings suggest that girls (19%) are more victims of CSA than boys (14%) in Pakistan. The situation in India is more serious as of 100, 52 percent of school-going children experienced sexual abuse. Data further suggests that 89 percent of perpetrators were found to be members of the family of those victimized. In Pakistan, this figure stands at 80 percent. Across the globe, 40 to 60 percent of the reported assaults were committed by those related to the victim one way or the other. The majority of those who underwent abuse were girls who belonged to the age group of 15 or below (Rahim, Bourgaize, Khan, Matthew, & Ian, 2021).

According to reports from Sahil, a non-governmental organization based in Islamabad that works on issues related to child sexual abuse, up to 11 cases of child sexual abuse are reported every day in Pakistan [\(GeoTV, 2018\)](#). Reports suggest that girls between the age of 11 to 15 are most vulnerable to abuse which account for 24% of cases reported over the last seven years. Sahil reports that 62% of total cases were reported from Punjab. Districts from central Punjab, including Muzaffargarh, Sheikupura, Lahore, Pakpattan, Multan, Kasur, Faisalabad, Vehari, Khanewal and Rawalpindi, are most vulnerable to child abuse, which constitutes 1109 out of 4139 total reported cases. Ironically, for every hundred assaults, eighty-three times the abuser was a person of trust, known to the victim or his/her family [\(Masood, 2018\)](#).

No doubt, the above figures show that the situation is extremely grim. But the question is, what is the way out to prevent children from sexual abuse. Different strategies have been proposed and adopted around the world to cope with the issue. There are a group of scholars who believe that cases of child sexual abuse demonstrate the failure of law enforcement agencies. For that reason, it is advisable to train and equip law enforcement forces with needed knowledge and technology to effectively address the issue of child sexual abuse. However, Child Molestation Research & Prevention Institute strongly believes that child maltreatment is preventable through education [\(PENDARVIS & SHOOK, 2017\)](#). As schools have the chief function to educate, they are a natural choice for teaching students about what constitutes sexual abuse and how to prevent it [\(Wurtele, 2009\)](#).

Although empirical research has yet to be conducted to find the effectiveness of programs to prevent child sexual abuse through education where such programs have been introduced and implemented, the idea to counter sexual abuse through education is quite new in Pakistan. However, hardly anyone can deny the importance of introducing content on how to prevent child sex abuse in curricula at the school level. These contents should cover themes like body ownership, distinguishing types of touches, identifying potential abuse situations, avoiding, resisting, or escaping such situations, secrecy, and how and whom to tell if abuse has occurred (Zwi, 2003). Importantly, these school-based programs to prevent child sexual abuse would primarily aim at teaching small children to equip them with knowledge as well as skills as how to recognize and avoid potentially sexually abusive situations along with strategies and techniques as to how to repel sexual approaches by offenders in various situations.

## Statement of the Problem

There is a consensus of opinion among teachers and school administration that the government must launch organized efforts to enlighten children on body protection education, but unfortunately, such preventive school-based programs are missing from public sector educational institutes in Pakistan. Teachers in schools further report that the Federal Ministry for Education is engaged with other important problems like the development of single nation uniform curriculum system across the country. As such programs appear to be on the top of governmental priorities, there is left little or no space or any energy to pay any attention to the issue of child sexual abuse.

However, since the barbarous murder of Zainab after she was raped, child sex abuse in Pakistan has been at the center of many media talks and reports. Since then, many cases of the same nature have been reported. Hardly anyone can doubt that the issue is getting serious in frequency and magnitude as time goes on. For that reason, there is a dire need to find ways as to how to tackle and address the issue. Can the inclusion of content on the prevention of child sex abuse be an advisable and effective way, given the traditional nature of Pakistani society where the inclusion of all such materials are often resisted and objected upon? The effectiveness of such school-based prevention programs can also be questioned because there are millions of children who are out of school for one reason or other and so will not be affected by such programs. Furthermore, are teachers at school trained enough to properly guide and educate young students in schools as to how to avoid sexual abuse before it results in harmful implications? These and some other related questions need further exploration and thorough research to decide upon the inclusion of content on the prevention of child sex abuse at the school level.

## Significance of the Study

Kids are most vulnerable to all kinds of abuses in any society. So, they need more responsible societal approaches and administrative mechanisms to secure their protection. Proactive, instead of reactive policies and programs to counter child sex abuse effectively may be a good idea, but it has not been tried and tested in Pakistan. This research study will highlight and bring into forth different intricacies and complexities involved in the introduction of and effectiveness of the inclusion of content on child sex abuse at the school level. Moreover, this research may open new vistas for researchers and scholars to understand and gauge the effectiveness of school-based prevention programs, a kind of proactive program to counter child sexual abuse and may prove to be the foundation work for more research on the subject.

Child sexual abuse is an issue prevalent almost everywhere around the world, although with varied magnitude and frequency. However, the most widely used strategy to contain or prevent child sexual abuse is through the provision of school-based programs. School-based prevention programs are primarily aimed at preventing children from undergoing sexual abuse experience. The contents of such programs revolve around themes including body ownership, be able to differentiate between various kinds of touchings, identifying abusive situations, how to avoid, escape or resist such situations and importantly, whom to report to when abuse has occurred. In other words, schools are the logical choice for programs aimed at the prevention of child sexual abuse because their primary function is to educate and have emerged as a natural setting for preventive measures by providing access to a greater majority of children. Moreover, school-based programs also help enhance the capacity of the community by providing information and raising awareness about child sexual abuse to a larger section of society, including parents and other stakeholders.

## Awareness Level in Schools

It was revealed from one of the studies conducted in the federal capital in public primary schools that the education ministry in the centre has not launched any concerted effort to create awareness among children studying in those schools about CSA. No material has been added into the existing books that can help teachers educate the students and create awareness among primary schools students. Along with this, the ministry concerned has not arranged for in-service teachers any training program to educate them on how to educate their students on CSA and its prevention.

## **School-based Preventive Intervention Programs**

No doubt, schools are better positioned to play an effective role in the prevention and reporting of child sexual abuse once it has taken place. Given the level of trust and frequency of interaction with management and teachers, children may be more vulnerable to abuse, especially within schools. Abuses include physical, sexual and emotional that may seriously affect the overall personality of a child. As the line between discipline, grooming, abuse, and exploitation is to blur, teachers and administrative staff have often been seen involved in the misuse of their authority. All this badly affects the mental health of students as well as their grades, contributing further to the cycle of abuse.

Over the years, multi-layer preventive programs, including primary, secondary and tertiary, have been proposed and implemented in response to the increased incidence of child sexual abuse. In comparison to other frameworks, this multi-pronged approach has been influential in developing intervention models in different countries. Primary intervention programs are primarily aimed at preventing CSA from taking place, and school-based CSA programs are rooted in primary prevention. These programs are proactive in nature and equip students with basic knowledge and awareness as to how to deal with unwanted/dangerous situations. In other words, these programs are risk reduction and more suitable for young schools kids.

United States of America was the one who took the lead to launch 1970s school-based programs to help address the issue of sexual abuse and gradually spread to the rest of the country. Statistics suggest that by the mid-1990s, two-third of the children between the age of 10 and 16 had participated in these programs. Now the question is that do school-based programs really work effectively? There is no doubt that this aspect is certainly under-researched. But in the American case where a limited number of studies have been conducted, it has been noticed that such programs, no doubt to a limited extent, have been effective in reducing the occurrence of sexual abuse. However, what has been learnt from these studies is that these programs work more effectively if they are more comprehensive, involving stakeholders.

School-based intervention programs must encompass an integrated approach to educate children, parents and teachers on how to prevent CSA. In other words, there is a need for a comprehensive approach that helps strengthen protective elements to reduce or eliminate the occurrence of CSA. In this regard, Kristy Weaver (2016) has provided a detailed and comprehensive model of curriculum components in order to make such programs more effective and fruitful. The following lines discuss the components of curriculum contents with a special focus on Pakistan, where the issue of CSA has worsened in terms of frequency of occurrence and magnitude.

## **Curriculum Contents**

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School-based preventive CSA programs have the primary objective to create awareness among children about sexual abuse, how to recognize the safe and unsafe situation and report it to adults, including parents and guardians, if abuse happens. Contents of books, especially textbooks, should be designed in such a way to ensure that these goals are met. Although Pakistan has yet to include lessons on sexual abuse in the textbooks, the pressure is mounting on the authorities to introduce life skills education that would equip students with the necessary knowledge to resist and report rape and sexual abuse. To make contents effective and ensure that the proposed objectives are met, curriculum books must include chapters on what exactly constitutes child sexual abuse, recognition of private body parts as well as the rights one has over his body, objectionable body touchings, resisting unwanted harmful situations, and avoiding to keep the abuse secret. Though it is almost near to impossible to include contents that will address all the above issues of CSA, there is a need for introducing chapters gradually over a longer period of time that would help contain the problem of CSA.

## What do Schools Need to do?

The problem is that if children can't identify hazardous and threatening situations, they may not deploy effectively self-protective skills in such situations. If they can't identify risky situations, they may find it difficult to identify a situation or even individuals that may possibly harm someone (Topping & Barron, 2009). A study conducted is suggestive that preprogram children thought to consider strangers as more dangerous than those that they knew, although the reverse being the case. Even there have been situations where children find it hard to link or relate any unwanted or negative event to someone known to them. Moreover, it has also been noticed that older children (sixth grade) have better risk perception than younger children (second grade) in the case of both pre and post-program (Topping & Barron, 2009).

School-based intervention programs may be more effective if they are all-encompassing, addressing issues that exist at different levels. It should have a comprehensive training plan for schools teachers and must educate the teachers on what constitutes child sexual abuse. Sherry Kraiser and others (1989) write that in order to protect children from abuse, it is important to educate teachers and parents as to what works and what not to prevent child sexual abuse (Kraiser, Sherry, Susan, & Fryer, 1989). Inadequate and insufficient training programs for teachers hinder teachers' ability to detect and respond to objectionable touching and sexual abuse. Situations become trickier for teachers when victims manifest no signs of abuse. In a study conducted, it was found that only 4 percent of teachers were aware of signs of sexual abuse; 17 percent stated that they would detect a sign of abuse if they were very obvious, while another 75 percent said that they would not be able to detect any signs of abuse (McIntyre, 1987). This is one of the important aspects of the issue and can only be addressed in a timely and effective training program for teachers is introduced in education institutes.

To counter abuse against children in different settings, what may be needed is to adopt a multi-stakeholder and cross-disciplinary approach. Ironically, there has been no law or act of the parliament in place that makes it mandatory for schools to report any abuse. Moreover, there is no law that binds schools to adopt a child protection policy. Besides, there is no regulatory body that asks schools to implement preventive sexual abuse mechanisms. This leads to a situation where schools are not made responsible for taking substantial steps to safeguard young kids against abuse. Most of the schools have been paying no attention to safety measures, including the installation of CCTV cameras even in classrooms. Job contracts signed with new recruits don't have any provision pertaining to protection against abuse, such as not being alone with the children in any situation.

It has been noticed that teachers working in private schools don't go through extensive training and graduate programs; the issue of timely identifications and reporting of abuse is more serious in such academic institutes. With the exception of some short term in-service trainings, a large number of teachers in private are not sufficiently educated to understand as to what constitutes sexual abuse, their definitions and identification of most important red flags that may include behavioral and physical cues.

It is high time to bring and introduce systematic changes in schools that specifically addresses the issue of sexual abuse against children in and out of schools. There is a need to establish a Child Protection Commission at the provincial level. Moreover, a Policy for Children Protection must be established. A Child Protection Information Management System and an Offenders Registry in every school must be introduced and maintained to effectively respond to the problem of child sexual abuse. The aim should be to focus more on providing a learning environment that is safe and helps prevent sexual abuse against young kids. For this purpose, a proper policy about child protection against sexual abuse should be erected. This policy should be supplemented with a regulatory body that bounds schools to follow safety protocols as provided by the policy. Furthermore, schools must be bound by law to constitute committees with senior students and students' parents against sexual abuse. The committee should also have an office expert in how to deal with issues related to abuse. It is also important that graduate programs that must encompass content about basic human and rights of children, and material on trauma and details about child protection. Schools should also have lessons on basic life protection skills, and age-appropriate content should be designed that may help body safety. Awareness campaigns should be launched that addresses problems like bullying and objectionable touching. As children with special

needs are more vulnerable to abuse, school programs should be designed in such a way that caters for their needs.

It is very important that a school is a place where children spend the greater part of their day. Thus it is necessary that the environment of the school should not be only conducive for learning but should also provide information on how to address child sexual abuse.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of child sexual abuse is prevalent almost everywhere in the world. Importantly, the issue has grown in magnitude and frequency in countries like Pakistan for certain unavoidable reasons. However, what is needed is to adopt a proactive approach to this problem. For this purpose, a school-based prevention program may have all the elements of an effective remedial package. This was initially launched in the US, where it has borne fruits. It is high time for the government in Pakistan a school-based prevention program that should involve all stakeholders, including parents, teachers and students as well. As the issue is growing in magnitude, no more time should be wasted, and measures related to protection against child abuse must be initiated at the earliest.

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