

DISRUPTING HARM IN PAKISTAN

Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Frequently asked questions (FAQ)

1. What is this report about and what is its significance?

This report, *Disrupting Harm in Pakistan*, is the first large-scale study of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the country. Drawing on a household survey with children and their caregivers, as well as interviews with justice professionals, frontline workers and law enforcement, it reveals a stark reality: this abuse is widespread, mostly hidden, and deeply embedded in children's everyday lives and relationships.

The findings make clear that this is not a marginal issue, but a large-scale child protection issue. By documenting these realities, the report provides crucial evidence to strengthen prevention, improve reporting and justice processes, hold technology platforms accountable, and expand access to survivor-centred care. It underscores the urgent need for coordinated action across government, civil society, tech companies, and families in Pakistan to better protect children and uphold their rights in the digital age.

2. What is Disrupting Harm?

Disrupting Harm is a pioneering global initiative launched in 2019 to uncover how digital technologies are used to exploit and abuse children – and to equip countries with the evidence needed to stop this violence. Funded by Safe Online and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL, and UNICEF Innocenti, the project has already generated critical insights in 13 countries.

By 2026, it will have delivered national-level data in 25 countries across six regions.

In Pakistan, the research was carried out between 2023 and 2025, mapping how technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse happens, identifies risk and protection factors, and provides an evidence-based roadmap for governments and partners to act. The findings are already shaping stronger laws, in other countries where the research has been carried out, prevention campaigns, and child protection systems around the world.

3. What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse refers to any form of child sexual exploitation and abuse **where digital technology plays a role** – whether in contacting children, grooming, coercion, image-sharing, livestreaming, or blackmail. It can happen entirely online or shift between online and in-person interactions. In some cases, abuse occurs entirely in-person but is recorded and shared digitally.

The survey looked at the following examples:

- Receiving unwanted sexual comments, images or videos
- Being pressured to talk about sex
- Requests for sexual content

- Fake sexual images made with AI
- Sharing or threats to share sexual images
- Offers of money or gifts for sexual content or meetings
- Threats or blackmail to force sexual activity

4. How widespread is this issue in Pakistan?

According to the household survey carried out as part of the study, in just **one year, nearly 1 in 16 children** (6%) **aged 12–17** had been subjected to at least one form of technology-facilitated sexual abuse in Pakistan. This number likely underestimates the issue, given the shame many children feel, and the limited set of behaviors surveyed (listed above).

5. Who are the most common perpetrators?

Contrary to common assumptions, the study revealed that perpetrators are not just strangers online. In fact, **4 in 5 cases** (85%) **involve people the child already knows** – friends, girlfriends, boyfriends, acquaintances and even family members.

6. Who is most at risk?

Children are often targeted on the platforms they use every day. Almost 1 in 2 instances (44%), occurred **exclusively online**, mostly via **social media platforms** (Snapchat [39%], WhatsApp [39%]).

More than 1 in 5 children first met the perpetrator in a public space (23%), almost 1 in 5 first met the perpetrator at home (19%), and 1 in 25 first met them at school (4%). However, **more than 1 in 4 children** reported first **meeting the perpetrator online (28%)**. These findings suggest that digital platforms often connect

children to perpetrators, but abuse is also rooted in familiar physical spaces, including the home. Interviews in Pakistan reveal how abuse often follows a continuum, from grooming to coercion and in-person exploitation. Perpetrators build trust, impersonate peers or exploit positions of authority.

Abuse can be recorded and shared meaning that harm often continues long after the initial incident, with children re-exposed and harmed every time their images are reshared.

7. What is the impact on children's lives?

Perpetrators take advantage of a child's context and of harmful social norms to abuse or exploit them and to keep them from seeking help. Perpetrators often use financial pressure, community influence or informal settlements to evade accountability. Families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are therefore not only more vulnerable to abuse but also face greater barriers to justice and recovery.

In Pakistan **no significant gender differences were found** between girls (7%) and boys (6%) being subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the interviews conducted as part of the study revealed distinct gender dynamics in the way abuse unfolds, how it is perceived by the child and the people around them, and what happens when children try to disclose or seek help. **Girls face heightened risks of sexual extortion and prolonged grooming**, often leading to **restrictions on mobility or withdrawal from school**. The consequences of abuse for girls can include instances of **honour-based abuse**, such as forced marriage or familial violence against children.

Boys, on the other hand, may be targeted in different contexts – such as gaming platforms as well as in their neighbourhoods. Their **victimization can often be overlooked or**

unrecognized due to social norms around masculinity. Professionals noted that abuse against boys often remained hidden **due to stigma around masculinity and sexual victimization**, which aligns with other child sexual abuse research. This underreporting of abuse against boys can further embolden perpetrators.

In Pakistan, sociocultural norms related to **izzat** (honour) and **sharam** (shame) can frame sexual abuse and exploitation as something that brings shame to the family of the child subjected to abuse, rather than placing accountability on the perpetrator. These norms **place children at risk of silence, self-blame, delayed help-seeking and continued harm.**

8. What is the impact on children's lives?

The impacts of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse extend beyond the incident. Harm is experienced across children's daily lives, family relationships and wider social environments, often affecting emotional well-being, safety, education and long-term opportunities. Physical manifestations of trauma, including weight loss because of changes in eating behaviours, becoming agitated and fainting were also observed by professionals. Psychological impacts were described as profound and long-lasting, including **anxiety, depression, guilt and self-blame**, which in some cases resulted in **suicidal thoughts or attempts.** **Pervasive fear** was described as a common consequence of technology-facilitated abuse.

This is exacerbated by the worry that sexual content may still be circulating online, which can generate extreme anxiety, school avoidance and persistent hypervigilance. The impacts of abuse are shaped profoundly by social norms linked to **honour and shame.** Families in Pakistan often experience **collective stigma**, as abuse is perceived

not only as a failure of the perpetrator but as a reflection of **parental negligence or moral deficiency.** Mothers are disproportionately blamed, reflecting patriarchal norms that assign women responsibility for safeguarding family honour while granting them limited authority or support.

This stigma can have long-term implications for education, marriage prospects, mobility and social inclusion – particularly for girls, whose sexuality is closely tied to family honour. Some families respond by restricting girls' movement, withdrawing them from school, or pressuring them into **child marriage as a means of "restoring honour"**. Parents may also contribute to the isolation of children by not allowing them to leave the house and depriving them of life opportunities. Due to stigma, families may decide to move to other communities which may further isolate children from relatives, friends and familiar environments. This **forced migration**, undertaken to escape stigma, often also results in the **loss of social networks, economic hardship** as for families who are forced to relocate, this may have serious financial repercussions.

9. Why don't children disclose or report their abuse?

More than 1 in 2 children (57%) never tell anyone about their abuse. Seeking help or reporting abuse is often a highly distressing process for children, marked by fear, uncertainty and shame, as a result of the community stigma and victim-blaming highlighted above.

Those who did talk to someone, most often told friends and siblings. Children and young people often sought help with the support of a sibling to avoid their parents knowing about the abuse. This highlights the important role that peers can play as trusted confidants and sources of support. Children should never be expected to bear responsibility for preventing or responding

to abuse, yet these findings demonstrate **the importance of ensuring that children know how to respond when a friend seeks help and where to turn for support from trusted adults and services.**

None of the children surveyed made an official report via helplines, social workers and police. A lack of trust in police deters children and their families from making a formal report.

10. What happens when children and young people seek justice?

For those who attempt to pursue justice, **the process itself can be retraumatizing.** Pakistani legislation does not require forensic interviews of children to be systematically conducted by specially trained professionals, increasing the **risk of secondary victimization from insensitive or inappropriate questioning.**

Children are often required to **testify in overcrowded courtrooms in the presence of the accused** and members of the public. Evidence such as sexual abuse material can be repeatedly displayed during proceedings, **reinforcing feelings of shame and loss of control.**

Social stigma, intimidation and community pressure frequently compel families to withdraw from proceedings or pursue informal settlements, undermining access to justice and accountability in cases of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.

11. What needs to change?

Children face major barriers in accessing support services including fear, stigma and family repercussions that limit engagement with support. There are also challenges within these support systems including **high caseloads, limited training and weak coordination.** Services are limited in

terms of both availability and specialization in child-centred protocols.

Initial family reactions may limit access to services and recovery pathways. Caregivers can be both gatekeepers and potential sources of protection. Concerns about reputation and family honour can take precedence over the child's well-being and uptake of protection services or even mere engagement with the child protection system.

There is also a lack of citizen trust in the child protection system. Communities struggle to accept them and their child after they are subjected to abuse. This highlights how trauma-informed care cannot focus on children alone. Where family attitudes remain unchanged, engagement with services may collapse. **Where families are supported to move beyond stigma and fear, children's recovery becomes more sustainable.**

12. What needs to change?

Building children's knowledge and preparedness is important, yet solely focusing on children's behavior unfairly places the burden on them for their own safety and overlooks the wider conditions that enable abuse or exploitation.

Some of the key recommendations proposed in the report include:

1. Address underlying conditions enabling exploitation including stigma, unequal power relations and lack of accountability, through a coordinated systems-based approach.
2. Strengthen educational initiatives to equip children and adolescents with knowledge and skills that support their rights, well-being and safe relationships.
3. Develop culturally appropriate, rights-based parenting programmes to strengthen trust and communication between parents and children and address harmful sociocultural norms.

4. Strengthen child protection systems to better address the continuum between online and in-person abuse and exploitation pathways.
5. Invest in mental health and psychosocial recovery
 - a) Expand access to integrated immediate and long-term, trauma-informed mental health and psychosocial support that is free for children and their families.
6. Address victim-blaming and community attitudes to reduce revictimization of children.
7. Support front-line professionals and improve working conditions to reduce burn-out.
8. Improve reporting pathways to make sure these are accessible for children, young people and families to safely disclose abuse and seek help.
9. Develop an integrated multi-sector response through coordinated, government-led approaches.
10. Amend legislation to ensure that technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively.
11. Strengthen child-centred justice procedures and ensure consistent national implementation.
12. Strengthen trust and accountability within justice systems for children, families and service providers.

See the full list of recommendations for a roadmap to action for Pakistan in the report.

13. What role do parents and caregivers play?

Parents and caregivers play an important role in preventing and addressing technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, but they should not be treated as solely responsible for preventing harm. The research shows that parents are often seen as the first line of defence, particularly through supervision, guidance and support around children's use of digital technology. However, placing too much emphasis on parental monitoring can create **unrealistic expectations, especially where caregivers face economic pressures, long working hours or limited digital literacy.**

A more effective role for parents and caregivers is to **build trusting, open relationships with children** so that children feel able to disclose concerns, coercion, grooming or abuse without fear of punishment, shame or blame. Caregivers can help by talking with children about online risks, privacy, grooming, blackmail and the misuse of images, while making clear that responsibility for abuse always lies with perpetrators. Supportive communication is especially important in contexts like Pakistan where stigma, honour-based norms and taboo around sexual abuse may silence children and families.

Parents and caregivers can also help children seek support and report abuse, including where sexual images or videos are shared or manipulated. However, **prevention should not rely only on surveillance, restriction or banning children from digital spaces.** Overly controlling approaches may undermine trust and lead children to hide online interactions or avoid asking for help. **Parents and caregivers need to be supported through digital literacy, awareness-raising and practical guidance,** while wider prevention efforts also address perpetrator tactics, platform responsibilities, safe reporting pathways, stigma and stronger child protection systems.

14. How can the media help?

Media professionals are key allies in protecting children.

- **Avoid victim-blaming, including through the use of appropriate terminology, and protect children's identities.** Ensure that reporting does not inadvertently place any responsibility on a child for the abuse/exploitation they were subjected to. Avoid details that could reveal their identity.
- **Focus on systemic issues, not the child's actions.** Reporting should highlight perpetrators, harms, and gaps in protection rather than framing the story around "shame."
- **Avoid sensationalism and graphic detail.** Excessive details about abuse can further harm children and risk revealing their identity. Trauma-informed language that does not minimize or normalize abuse is key.

- **Respect legal safeguards and investigations.** Follow laws and ethical standards within media protecting children victims of crime and avoid publishing information that could interfere with cases.
- **Share information about support services.** Where possible, include helplines and reporting channels so children and families know where to seek help.

Helpful resources for children and families

- Child helpline: 1121
- Police helpline: 15
- National Commission on the Rights of the Child: 051-9202733
- Pakistan Telecommunication Authority: <https://complaint.pta.gov.pk/CMS/>
- National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency: 1799
- Ministry of Human Rights Helpline: 1099

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