

DISRUPTING HARM IN PAKISTAN

Evidence on technology-facilitated
child sexual exploitation and abuse



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This report discusses the sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Pakistan. It includes accounts of child sexual exploitation and abuse cases as described by professionals in Pakistan. Readers are encouraged to monitor their responses to the content and only engage with this report in ways that feel comfortable to them.

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CHAIRPERSON OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Every child in Pakistan has the right to grow up safe, respected, and protected - online as much as offline. The digital world has opened extraordinary doors for our children: to learn, to connect, to imagine futures beyond their immediate surroundings. But the same technologies that empower them are being exploited to harm them. Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is not a distant or abstract threat; it is a reality unfolding in our homes, schools, and communities, often hidden behind silence, shame, and stigma.

The findings of *Disrupting Harm* in Pakistan compel us to confront this reality. In a single year, an estimated 1.5 million internet-using children aged 12 to 17 - six per cent of those surveyed - were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. In the vast majority of instances, the perpetrator was someone the child knew. Most painfully, in almost two out of three cases, the child told no one. Children stayed silent because they felt embarrassed, or simply did not know who to turn to. This silence is not a failure of our children; it is a failure of the systems and social norms that surround them - and it is ours to fix.

This study is the most comprehensive evidence gathered to date on this issue in Pakistan. It examines not only the scale and nature of these crimes, but the barriers children face in disclosure, reporting, and access to justice, and the gaps in our legal framework that allow perpetrators to act with impunity. Evidence of this quality is a powerful instrument: it replaces assumption with fact, and it gives policymakers, legislators, law enforcement, educators, and families a clear map of what must change.

The National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRC), as the statutory body mandated to promote and protect the rights of every child in Pakistan, is committed to translating these findings into action. Through our ongoing work with federal and provincial partners, we will press for legislative reforms that criminalise all forms of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in line with international standards; for child-centred, trauma-informed reporting and justice mechanisms; for accessible psychosocial support for survivors; and for education and awareness that reaches children, parents, and teachers in every district. We must also confront the social norms - the fear of shame - that too often silence victims and shield perpetrators.

I extend my deep gratitude to UNICEF, ECPAT, INTERPOL, Safe Online and all partners in the *Disrupting Harm* initiative for their collaboration and rigour, to the professionals across government, law enforcement, and civil society who contributed their insights, and above all to the children and young people whose voices and experiences form the heart of this report. Their courage in speaking is a trust placed in us, and we must honour it.

Protecting children in the digital age is a shared responsibility. No single institution can do it alone. I invite every reader of this report - legislator, parent, teacher, technology company, and citizen - to treat its findings as a call to action. Together, we can disrupt this harm and build a Pakistan where every child is safe, both online and offline.

Senator Ayesha Raza Farooq

Chairperson

National Commission on the Rights of the Child (NCRC)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Funded by Safe Online, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti (UNICEF Innocenti) worked in partnership to design and implement the Disrupting Harm research project and methodology. The original project idea and conceptualization were developed by Safe Online, providing the foundation for this collaborative effort.

This unique partnership uses a multidisciplinary approach to enhance our collective understanding of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse and the national response to these forms of violence against children. A combined investment of 15 million USD has allowed the Disrupting Harm research to be conducted in 13 countries across Eastern and Southern Africa and Southeast Asia from 2019 to 2022, and in another 12 countries, including Pakistan, from 2023 onwards. Between 2023 and 2025, ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti conducted research in Pakistan to understand tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse from multiple viewpoints. The data in Pakistan were collected through a national household survey with 12–17-year-olds, interviews with justice professionals, front-line workers and law enforcement, and an analysis of national legislation and policy.

What is technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

The Disrupting Harm project uses the term technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to refer to situations involving digital, internet and communication technologies at some point during the sexual exploitation or abuse of a child. This type of violence is sometimes referred to as 'online' child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, the term 'technology-facilitated' is now preferred¹ to convey that this violence against children does not only occur in online spaces; it can occur fully online, or through a mix of online and in-person interactions between perpetrators and children.

More information concerning key definitions used in this report can be found in the [annex](#).

Key findings

Technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan

- Nearly 6 per cent of internet-using children in Pakistan aged 12–17 were subjected to at least one form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse the past year – approximately 1.5 million children.
- Sexual extortion, blackmail and artificial intelligence-generated abuse reflect evolving risks.
- Interviews in Pakistan show how technology can be used by perpetrators across the spectrum of child sexual exploitation and abuse, including to initiate, facilitate, record and prolong abuse.
- Exploitation and abuse often follow a continuum, from grooming to coercion and in-person exploitation.
- Perpetrators build trust, impersonate peers or exploit positions of authority.
- In most cases (85 per cent), perpetrators are known to the child.
- Perpetrators operate across online and in-person environments.
- Nearly 44 per cent of all occurrences took place exclusively online (N=34), while 5 per cent occurred both online and in person (N=4).
- Social media was the most commonly reported digital environment, accounting for 44 per cent of occurrences (N=34), followed by online games (5 per cent, N=4).
 - Snapchat and WhatsApp were the most reported platforms, each accounting for 39 per cent of occurrences (N=13 and N=14 respectively), reflecting the central role of private messaging applications in facilitating exploitation and abuse, coercion and the circulation of sexual content.

¹ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition](#), ECPAT International, Bangkok, 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disclosure and reporting of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- Disrupting Harm survey data found that of the instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse reported among children aged 12–17 in Pakistan in the year prior to being surveyed, 57 per cent were not disclosed to anyone. This means that in over half of instances, children did not tell a parent, friend, teacher or any other person about exploitation or abuse.
- Community stigma and victim-blaming create fear that silences children and their families. These social norms may be held more strongly in rural or conservative communities.
- A lack of trust in police deters children and their families from making a formal report.
- Family support is a critical enabler of disclosure and reporting, but is difficult given pervasive community stigma experienced by both children and their families.
- None of the children surveyed reported to formal avenues, including helplines, social workers and police.

Access to services for children subjected to technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse

- Children face major barriers in accessing support services including fear, stigma and family repercussions limit engagement with support.
- Services are limited in terms of both availability and specialization in child-centred protocols.
- Challenges include high caseloads, limited training and weak coordination.

Criminalization of technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act in Pakistan provides a strong legal foundation for protection, including dedicated provisions criminalizing online grooming and the unwanted exposure of children to sexual content. However, there remain opportunities for further developments in response to evolving online risks.

- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act criminalizes a range of criminal conduct related to child sexual abuse material, including possession without intent to distribute. However, mere access is not criminalized, creating a loophole that allows individuals to deliberately seek out and view such content with impunity.
- The transmission of child sexual abuse material through an information system is criminalized, but this may not be sufficient to cover the livestreaming of child sexual abuse where no material is created, downloaded or stored.
- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act's substantive offence provisions define child sexual abuse material in terms of visual representations, leaving a gap in protection for non-visual forms such as audio-only content. They also do not explicitly cover digitally generated or manipulated material, including content created using artificial intelligence.
- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act still uses the term 'child pornography' to refer to child sexual abuse material. This outdated terminology can imply that such images or recordings are a form of pornography, thereby failing to reflect their abusive nature.
- As the age of criminal responsibility is set at 10 years and no exemptions exist, children from that age onwards could potentially face prosecution for voluntarily creating or sharing their own sexual content, despite such acts arising from sexual exploration.
- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act enables the prosecution of sexual extortion of children, but the corresponding provision only partially reflects the coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort sexual acts, money or other benefits from a child.
- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act criminalizes the use of an information system to sexually exploit a child through the payment of money or other benefits but does not explicitly extend to situations where such payment is only promised.

Access to justice and legal remedies

- The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act provides for expedited proceedings for the offences it regulates, but challenges such as understaffed courts, procedural inefficiencies and institutional limitations undermine the implementation of this safeguard.
- Private legal representation is often required to pursue cases, making access to justice contingent on financial means. State-funded legal assistance is subject to application procedures that may limit its accessibility, while transportation costs and lost wages hinder families' participation in proceedings.
- 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.
- While the Anti-Rape Act includes safeguards such as restrictions on repeated questioning, the mandatory recording of interviews and prohibitions on direct cross-examination of the child by the accused, in practice children may still be required to recount the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to multiple times, often in hostile environments.
- Despite legal requirements for closed proceedings for offences under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 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 tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Interviews suggested that digital evidence tend to be dismissed by police in favour of physical or forensic evidence, creating significant barriers to initiating proceedings in cases where no exploitation or abuse involving physical contact is alleged or proven.

- Despite strict legal obligations to protect electronic evidence, interviewees reported instances in which visual material was circulated within police networks, viewed unnecessarily by multiple professionals or otherwise mishandled.

Prevention

- Survey findings suggest that commonly promoted online safety skills may not necessarily reduce children's likelihood of being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, highlighting the limitations of prevention strategies that rely predominantly on individual behavioural change among children or their caregivers.
- Awareness-raising initiatives largely focus on what children, particularly girls, should avoid doing online, despite evidence from professional case accounts that exploitation and abuse often involve grooming, coercion, extortion and abuse of trust that awareness alone may not prevent.
- Professional narratives expressed in the study frequently relied on 'stranger danger' assumptions, despite both survey and qualitative findings indicating that children are more often exploited by known individuals, including peers, trusted adults and authority figures.
- Perpetrators were found to exploit power imbalances, economic vulnerability, stigma and children's fear of blame or exposure to coerce compliance and maintain silence.
- Overall, the findings suggest that effective prevention requires shifting from surveillance-heavy and victim-blaming approaches towards rights-based strategies centred on empowerment, trusted relationships, stigma reduction, safe disclosure pathways, and stronger perpetrator and platform accountability.
- The increasing accessibility of generative artificial intelligence technologies creates new risks for the creation and dissemination of fake or manipulated child sexual abuse imagery, requiring stronger legal, platform and detection responses.
- Existing legal and regulatory frameworks impose limited proactive obligations on digital platforms to detect, prevent and remove child sexual abuse material and do not incorporate safety-by-design requirements.

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- The findings highlight a critical prevention gap. Prevention efforts remain heavily focused on children and caregivers, while insufficiently addressing offender accountability, structural vulnerabilities, online platform responsibilities and institutional failures.

This report ends with a set of data-driven recommendations based on its key findings. They include action to be taken by key actors across government, law enforcement, justice and social services sectors, by communities, schools and families, and by digital platforms and service providers. These are too detailed to be recounted in the executive summary but can be found on [page 72](#) of this report.

METHODS

The Disrupting Harm methodology combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a better understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan. The quantitative data provide an understanding of the scope of this issue among children aged 12–17 in Pakistan. The analysis of national legislation and policies, together with the qualitative interviews conducted, provide insights into the formal systems and processes intended to support children subjected to tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse. It also offers important context to understand the sexual exploitation and abuse that children face and how families and communities react to it.

The same research methods were implemented in all 12 countries from the current research cycle and adapted with local researchers to best suit the country context. The research was designed and implemented following strict safeguarding and ethics protocols. In total, six separate but complementary research activities were designed with the aim of answering the following questions:

1. What characterizes tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
2. What factors are associated with victimization and perpetration?
3. How do children protect themselves against, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse?
4. How do families, friends and social networks prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
5. How do organizations (e.g. law enforcement, justice sector, service providers, government, educators) protect, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?
6. How does existing policy and legislation protect against, prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse?

A summary of methods used for each of the six research activities is presented below.

Legal and policy analysis

The analysis of national legal and policy frameworks was aimed at identifying legal gaps, assessing compliance with international obligations, and highlighting both strengths and weaknesses in national responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The legal and policy analysis was developed using a detailed checklist consisting of over 140 items, ensuring consistency across countries analysed. This tool, based on international legal standards and best practices, evaluates areas such as legal definitions, criminalization, jurisdiction, child-centric justice, private sector responsibilities and child protection policies.

To conduct the analysis, ECPAT International collected national laws and policy documents in collaboration with local partners, ensuring they reflected current legal frameworks. These were analysed using the checklist to identify legal gaps and enforcement challenges, supported by case law and reports on prosecution where available. The draft analysis underwent internal and external expert reviews, including review from the local ECPAT member organization and the UNICEF country office, to ensure accuracy and real-world relevance.

More information on this research method can be found [here](#).

Household survey of 12–17-year-olds and their parents

The purpose of the survey was to hear directly from children and their parents/guardians about their online experiences, both positive and negative. The questionnaire was divided into modules, most of which were administered by an enumerator. For personal questions, including around sexual violence, respondents input their answers directly in the tablet to ensure that their comfort and confidentiality were protected. The target population for the survey was 12–17-year-old internet users who live in a private (or individual) household. In addition, one of their parents/guardians was also interviewed regardless of

METHODS

whether they used the internet. 'Internet users' were defined as those who had used the internet in the three months prior to the survey, in line with the threshold set by the International Telecommunications Union.²

To achieve a nationally representative random sample of 12–17-year-old internet users, the survey used random probability sampling with national coverage. In Pakistan, the fieldwork coverage was 91 per cent. The sampling frame does not include Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK due to security reasons, accounting for 6 per cent of the population. 'Coverage' is defined as the proportion of the total population that had a chance of being included in the survey sample – meaning that the fieldwork would cover the area where they live if sampled. Data collection took place from February to November 2025.

The sampling followed a three-stage random probability clustered sample design. The response rate was 52 per cent, and the sample achieved included 1,012 children and 1,012 of their parents/guardians.

The age and gender breakdowns of the sample are presented below:

Age and gender distribution of child sample:

12–14 years	53%
15–17 years	47%
Girls	45%
Boys	55%

Age and gender distribution of parent sample:

Aged under 40 years	46%
Aged 40 and above	54%
Women	71%
Men	29%
Other	0%

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

Interviews with front-line workers

This research activity aimed to understand how front-line workers in Pakistan support children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and to identify how systems can better prevent and respond to these forms of violence. It also aimed to explore the experiences of front-line workers handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as their perceptions of good practices and challenges.

The population of interest for the study was front-line workers in Pakistan – such as social workers, child protection officers, psychotherapists, front-line police officers and helpline workers – who provide support or essential services directly to individuals who were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Potential participants were identified through the professional networks of local non-governmental organization (NGO) partner Protection and Help of Children Against Abuse & Neglect (PAHCHAAN), which spans all provinces and administrative areas of Pakistan. Front-line workers were invited to participate in the study if their case/patient load over the last 12 to 36 months included at least one child or young person who had been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood and if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case. Final selection, however, was based on participants' availability, their willingness to take part in the study and their consent to have their responses recorded.

Interviews were conducted by trained qualitative researchers in Urdu, English and Punjabi between April and September 2025. Among the front-line workers interviewed, 5 were women and 10 were men. Interviews were conducted in four locations (Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and Islamabad Capital Territory). Participants had provided services to

² International Telecommunications Union, *Manual for Measuring ICT Access and Use by Households and Individuals*, 2020 edition, ITU, Geneva, 2020. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/manual/ITUManualHouseholds2020_E.pdf.

young people from Balochistan, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Islamabad Capital Territory, Sindh, Gilgit-Baltistan and Kashmir.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity with front-line workers will be indicated with (FW) at the end of quotes.

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

Interviews with justice professionals

This research activity aimed to understand how Pakistan justice mechanisms respond to children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to identify how systems can better prevent and respond to these forms of violence. The research also aimed to explore the experiences of justice professionals handling cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as their perceptions of good practices and challenges.

The population of interest for this study was justice professionals in Pakistan, such as lawyers, judges and investigators. The decision to include some investigators as justice professionals was made after careful consideration of the nature of their roles and responsibilities. Unlike front-line workers, these professionals are not primarily involved in direct, field-level interactions with children, families or communities. Instead, their role centres on handling cases that have already been formally reported and referred for investigation. Their responsibilities include collecting evidence, conducting formal investigations, preparing case documentation, and submitting findings and assessments to the relevant courts. Given that their duties are predominantly legal, procedural and investigative in nature, and closely aligned with the criminal justice system and legal frameworks governing tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse cases, they were considered appropriately categorized as justice professionals and included in the sample.

Potential participants were identified through PAHCHAAN's professional network, spanning all provinces and administrative areas of Pakistan. Justice professionals were invited to participate in the study if they had a direct role working on a case of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the last five years and if they were able to talk to the researchers about a de-identified case. Ongoing cases were excluded to ensure the integrity of the case in the justice system. Final selection, however, was based on participants' availability, their willingness to take part in the study and their consent to have their responses recorded.

Interviews were conducted by trained researchers in Urdu, English and Punjabi between April and September 2025. Participants included 16 justice professionals across government, law enforcement, non-governmental organizations and independent legal practices. Their responsibilities included investigation, prosecution and legal defence in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, and legal advocacy. Among the justice professionals interviewed, 6 were women and 10 were men. Participants were based across the Punjab province, Islamabad Capital Territory and Balochistan.

Throughout the report, attributions to data from this research activity with justice professionals will be indicated with (JP) at the end of quotes.

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

Interviews with young people

Disrupting Harm methods include a research activity aimed to include the voices of children and young people (16–24 years) who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse during childhood.³ The trauma-informed qualitative research method was piloted in Pakistan as part of the study. However, based on advice from in-country partners and the Disrupting Harm research team, the activity did not proceed due to limitations in ensuring the health and safety of participants in the study.

³ This study uses the terms children and young people to refer to participants in this research activity. Children are defined as anyone under the age of 18 years. While there is no universally agreed age group to describe young people, the study follows the United Nations' practice of referring to young people as those aged 15–24 years.

More information on this research method, including safeguarding protocols and limitations, can be found [here](#).

Interviews with national law enforcement

INTERPOL's Crimes Against Children Unit conducts field-based assessments in collaboration with each member country's National Central Bureau. INTERPOL's team engaged directly with national law enforcement agencies in Islamabad, as well as child protection units, and trusted civil society partners and NGOs. The aim was to understand the operational realities of investigating and responding to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. These engagements focus on identifying practical challenges: gaps in resources, limitations in investigative capacity and barriers to international cooperation. The findings inform the targeted support INTERPOL provides, which could include access to specialized training, analytical tools and coordinated operational assistance. While this report includes INTERPOL's aggregated non-sensitive findings, the full scope of its observations and conclusions (including detailed operational recommendations and tailored capacity-building measures) are shared exclusively with national authorities, ensuring the integrity of ongoing investigations. More information on this research method can be found [here](#).

Limitations and understanding the data

To fully understand the findings of this report, it is important to consider the limitations of the research activities and their implementation in Pakistan.

The **household survey** was conducted in private households with 12–17-year-old internet users. The survey was designed to be nationally representative of this group of children only, as opposed to all children in Pakistan. The survey is cross-sectional, not longitudinal, meaning that the data capture a single moment in time in the lives of the 1,012 children and parents surveyed. While the Disrupting Harm data highlight relationships between sexual abuse and other factors in children's lives, it is not possible to determine cause and effect based on these survey data alone.

The survey does not intend to measure all the possible ways that digital technologies are used to exploit or abuse children. Some forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, like grooming, are particularly difficult to measure as they can involve complex and continuous interactions between children and perpetrators. Livestreaming of child sexual abuse can also be difficult to measure as children may not be aware that their abuse was filmed, let alone livestreamed.

As with other studies on sexual violence, a high level of underreporting is expected due to several factors, including potential discomfort speaking about a very personal and painful experience, fears around confidentiality and anonymity, and social norms and taboos around discussing sexual violence. In addition, children may not know how or to whom they can report tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, which can further discourage disclosure. This means that the data presented are likely an underestimate. Low sample sizes also limit the kind of statistical analysis that can be conducted on the data.

The **interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals** do not aim to provide a measure of the types or amount of violence in Pakistan due to the nature of this research method. Pakistan has diverse justice, case management and social services that can vary across and within provinces. Likewise, socioeconomic contexts vary and may be more or less reflected in the views and experiences of professionals interviewed from the three provinces of Balochistan, Punjab and Sindh. However, these data can help provide context and meaning for understanding these types of abuse and how they occur. It is also important to note that the cases that reach the formal support or justice system only represent a small proportion of abuse cases and may reflect cases more widely understood as abuse.

Ethical approval

UNICEF Innocenti obtained ethical approval for the Disrupting Harm project from the Health Media Lab, a global institutional review board. In addition, the National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC) and the National Advisory Committee of the NCRC for the Disrupting Harm

(DH) study, which included representatives from government institutions, NGOs and other key national stakeholders on online child protection, reviewed and provided feedback on the research protocols and tools. The survey tools and protocols were also reviewed and approved by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). The sampling and selection of primary sampling units (PSUs) was also conducted by PBS.

National consultation

In a national consultation in April 2026 hosted by the National Commission on the Rights of the Child, representatives across sectors including government, law enforcement authorities and civil society in Pakistan were asked to provide input on the Disrupting Harm findings and recommendations to enhance their relevance for the Pakistan context.



INTRODUCTION

Disrupting Harm uses the term ‘technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse’ to refer to *any* form of sexual exploitation and abuse of a child that involves the use of technology. This broad definition allows for recognition of the diverse and evolving ways that digital tools, platforms and content can be used in the sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

Technology in this context includes, but is not limited to, the internet, social media, messaging apps, online gaming platforms and devices used to create or distribute images, videos or other content. The definition does not depend on who the perpetrator is, how they commit the abuse, or the child’s awareness that what is happening is abusive. It also does not depend on the child’s actions before, during or after the sexual exploitation and abuse has taken place.

Each child subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse has a unique story. For some, it may be a single incident; for others, it is part of a broader pattern of violence in their lives. Incidents documented throughout this report could be connected to existing abusive relationships, human trafficking, violence in school, home or the community, or other forms of violence that extend beyond what is captured through this research.

Perpetrators may use digital platforms to manipulate or threaten children they already know, or to seek out new victims. Technology facilitates sexual exploitation and abuse in different ways: in some cases, it remains confined to the digital realm; in others, it extends exploitation and abuse that are already taking place in person. And in other instances, exploitation and abuse begin online and later progress into physical contact.

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse is shaped by a variety of factors and dynamics that are difficult to capture. These include but are not limited to power imbalances, social identities, and social, gender, cultural and religious norms and values. These dynamics are not always directly visible in the data but are critical to understanding how sexual exploitation and abuse occur and how children are impacted.

Being aware of these nuances is important when reading this report. Without considering the context in which violence occurs, there is a risk of oversimplifying the issue. Looking at individual cases or statistics alone can risk overlooking the societal forces that enable sexual exploitation and abuse or allow it to continue undisclosed and unreported. What children share in surveys and interviews represents what they felt comfortable with disclosing at that point in time, meaning that the full extent of the problem is likely to be greater than captured in this report.

Nonetheless, the findings presented in this report go a long way towards unpacking tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan. It adds much-needed nuance and understanding to this issue, grounded in the experiences of children and young people, and the professionals working to support them.

INTERNET USE IN PAKISTAN

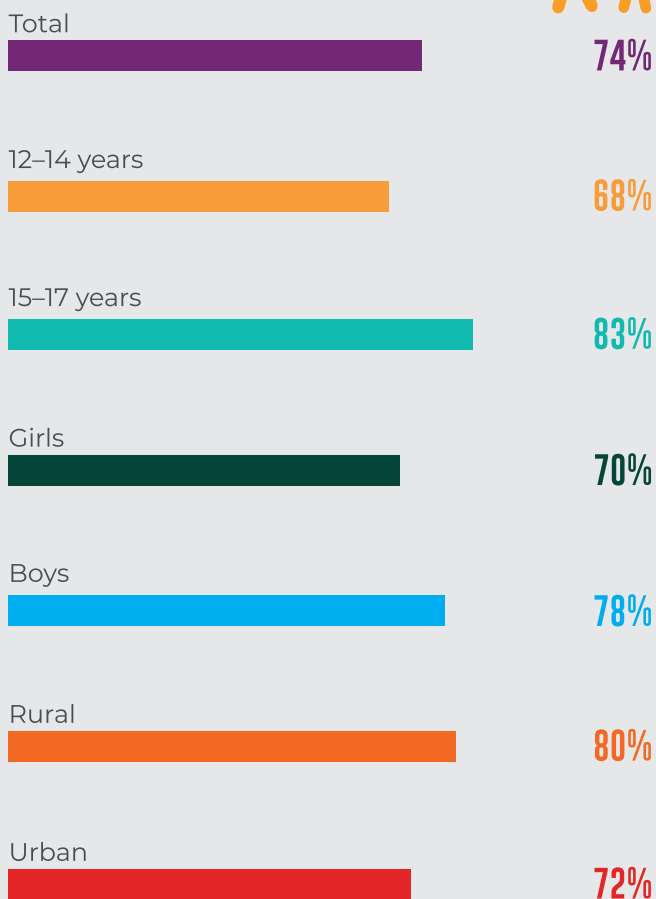
National-level data on children's internet access and use are often scarce. The Disrupting Harm project collected key indicators on children's internet use via the household survey to address this gap.

Understanding how children access the internet, whether they go online regularly or not, what they do online and how parents engage with their internet use, may provide insights into how to create a digital environment that is safer and more enjoyable for children. However, prevention of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse is not primarily about what children are doing online. Disrupting Harm data consistently show that perpetrators act opportunistically, using

coercion and manipulation while taking advantage of existing social and gender inequalities, misogyny, the lack of adequate support networks, and gaps in protection systems to commit abuse against children online and/or in person.

Any effort at prevention must therefore look beyond what children are (or ought to be) doing online; not doing so often results in victim-blaming or treating children as complicit in the exploitation and abuse they have been subjected to, as evidenced in this report. Instead, prevention requires a multi-pronged approach that focuses on creating barriers to offending, while addressing norms, values and inequalities that enable perpetrators to sexually exploit and abuse children.

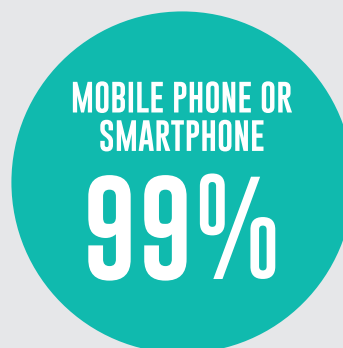
INTERNET USE RATES AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLDS IN PAKISTAN



Base: 2,143 households.



MOST POPULAR DEVICES TO ACCESS THE INTERNET AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



TABLET

4%

COMPUTER

4%

VIRTUAL REALITY HEADSET
0.1%

OTHER
0.3%

Base: 1,012 internet-using children.

INTERNET USE IN PAKISTAN

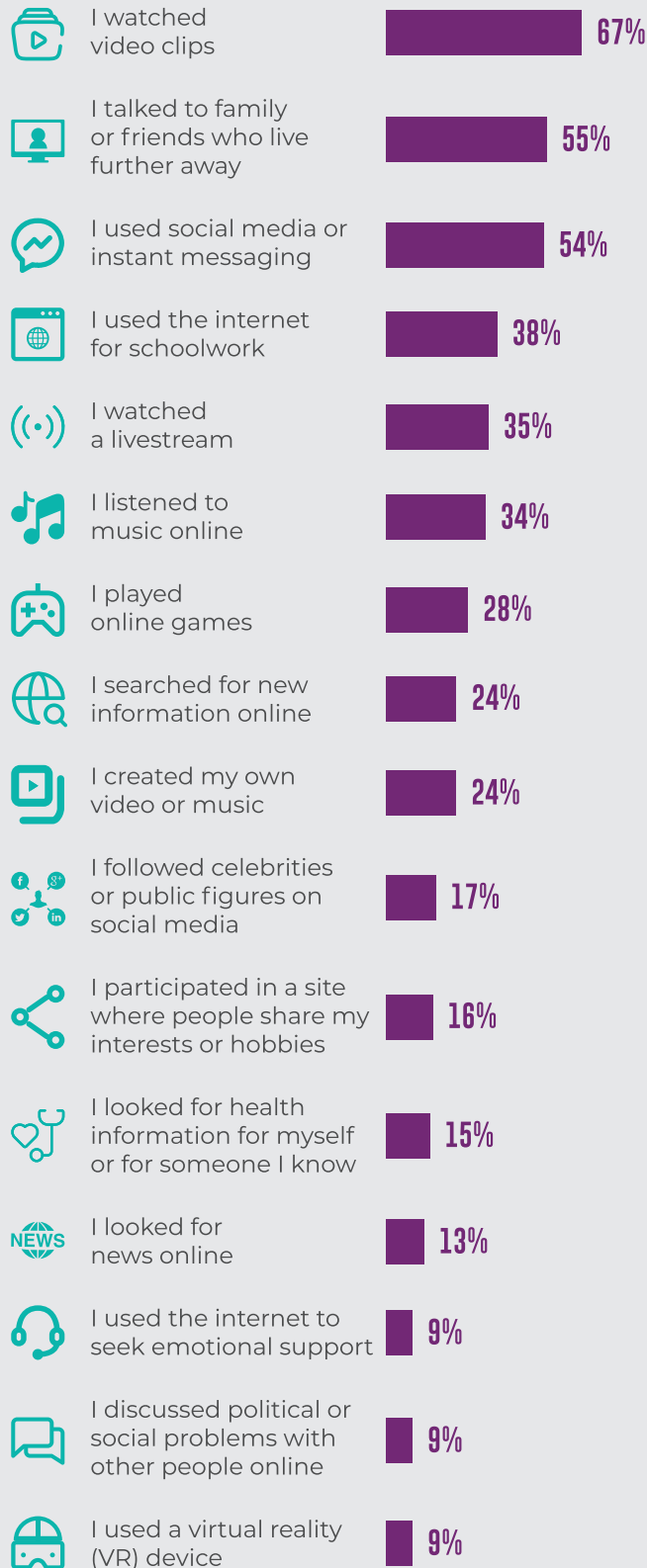
BARRIERS TO INTERNET ACCESS AMONG INTERNET-USING 12–17-YEAR-OLDS



Base: 1,012 internet-using children.

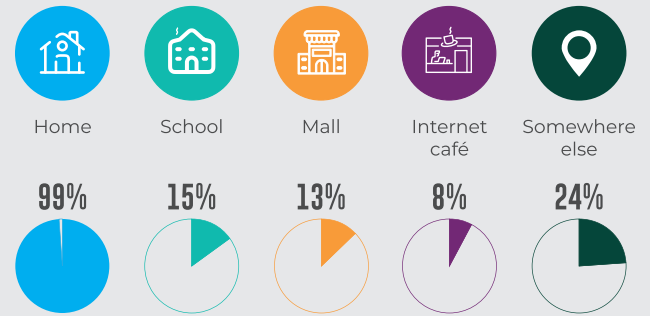
INTERNET USE IN PAKISTAN

ACTIVITIES CHILDREN ENGAGE IN ONLINE AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK



Base: 1,012 internet-using children.

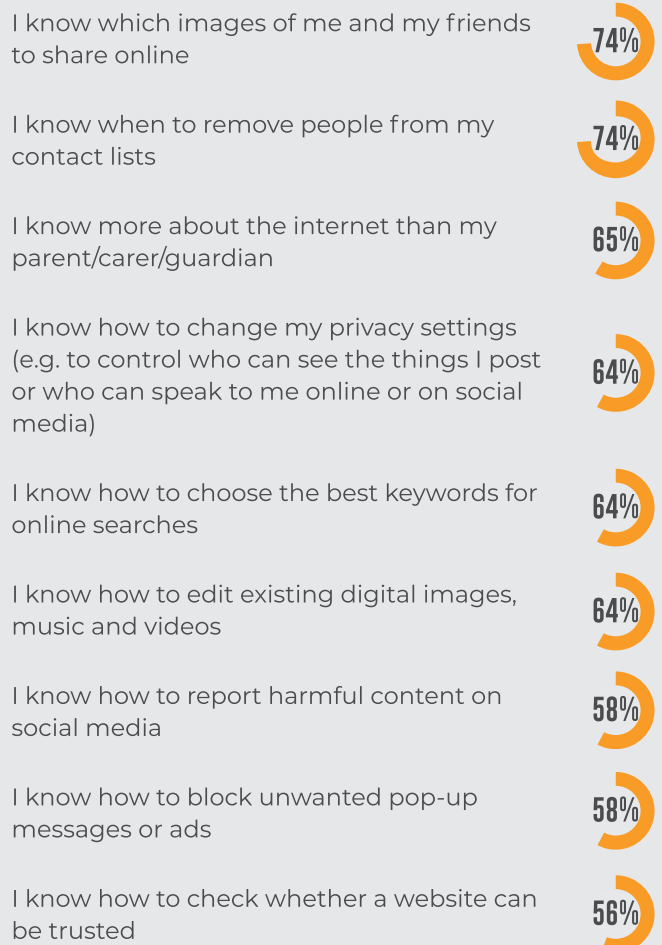
MOST POPULAR PLACES TO GO ONLINE AMONG INTERNET-USING CHILDREN AGED 12–17*



Base: 1,012 internet-using children.

* Multiple-choice question.

DIGITAL SKILLS AMONG 12–17-YEAR-OLD INTERNET USERS IN PAKISTAN*

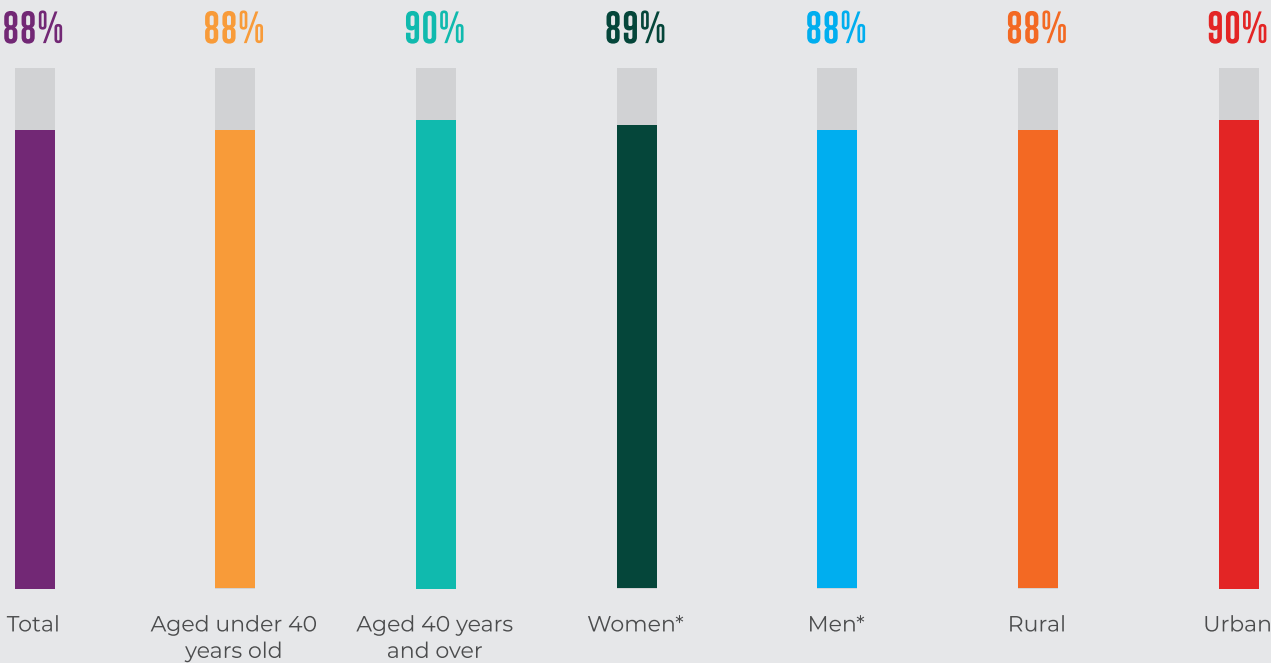


Base: 1,012 internet-using children.

*Percentage of children who say it is 'mostly' or 'very' true that they can do this.

INTERNET USE IN PAKISTAN

INTERNET USE RATES AMONG THE PARENTS OF 12–17-YEAR-OLD INTERNET USERS



Base: 1,012 caregivers of internet-using 12–17-year-old children.

* The results could be skewed due to the high proportion of women (71 per cent) in the parents' sample and should be interpreted with caution.

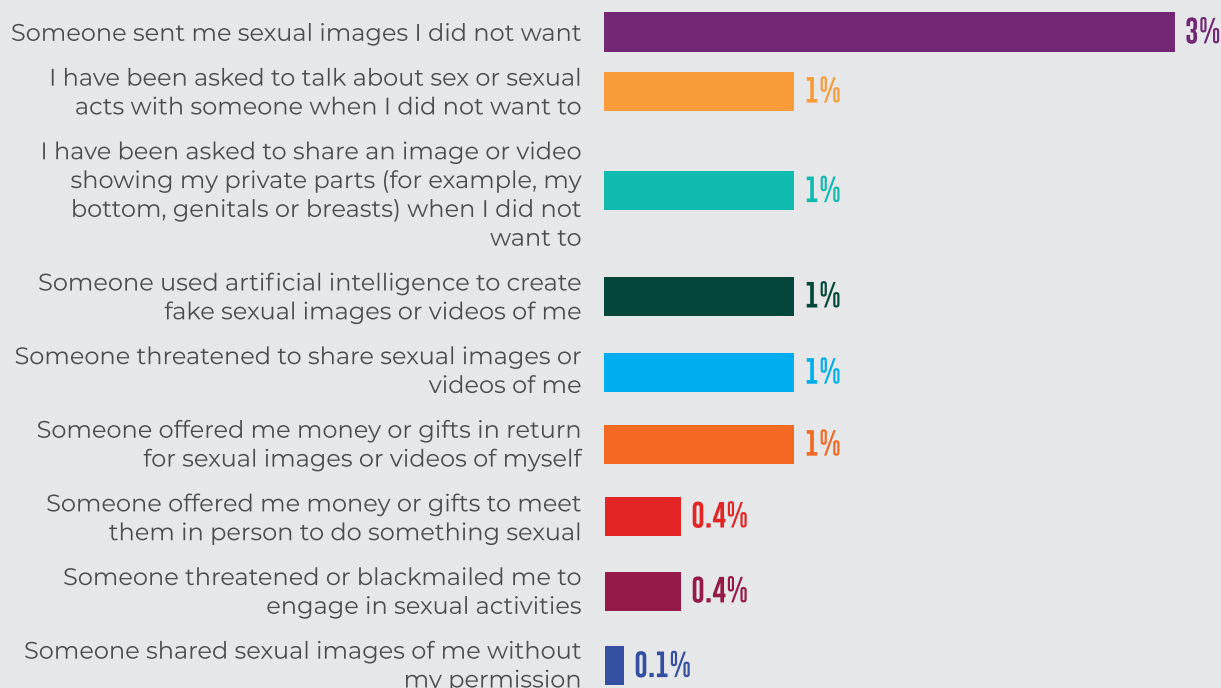
1. TECHNOLOGY- FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN



1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN

Based on the household survey, 6 per cent of internet-using children surveyed in Pakistan were subjected to one of these instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in a one-year period. Scaled up to the overall population of 12–17-year-old internet-using children in Pakistan, this represents an estimated 1.5 million children who have been subjected to any of these harms in the span of a single year.

Percentage of children surveyed who said that the following things happened to them online in the past year



Base: 1,012 internet-using children aged 12–17 in Pakistan.

This section presents findings from the household survey with 1,012 children aged 12–17 and 1,012 parents/guardians, as well as from interviews with front-line workers, and justice professionals. It explores the nature and scope of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, detailing the different forms it can take, the proportion of those affected and the circumstances in which it occurs.

When interpreting these findings, it is important to recognize that the true extent of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan is likely to be underestimated in this report. Contextual factors such as social norms surrounding exploitation and abuse, childhood, gender and sexuality contribute to widespread underreporting. Front-line workers and justice professionals frequently described victim-blaming

attitudes and social stigma around sexual abuse. In such an environment, many children may not feel safe or supported enough to disclose or report the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to.

The Disrupting Harm household survey measured children's exposure to nine different forms of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse (see table above). The survey data reveal that nearly 6 per cent of children aged 12–17 were subjected to at least one measured form of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in the year prior to being surveyed (N=60). Some children were subjected to more than one form of abuse; therefore, in total, the survey captured approximately 77 instances of abuse among 60 children, forming the foundation for many of the statistics presented in this report.



Spotlight: Gendered dynamics of exploitation and abuse

Survey data indicate that 6 per cent of boys and 7 per cent of girls were subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, a difference that is not statistically significant. However, interviews with professionals suggest that the forms and contexts in which exploitation and abuse occur may still follow gendered patterns. This means that while children may be subjected to violence in similar proportions no matter their gender, the dynamics behind exploitation and abuse, as well as what happens when children try to disclose or seek help, can differ.

In the Pakistani context, 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 exploitation and abuse, rather than placing accountability on the perpetrator. These norms place children at risk of silence, self-blame, delayed help-seeking and continued harm based on their gender identity.

For example, according to professionals interviewed for the study, girls face heightened risks of sexual extortion and prolonged grooming, often leading to restrictions on mobility or withdrawal from school. The consequences of exploitation and abuse can include instances of honour-based abuse, such as forced marriage or familial violence against children. At the same time, according to professionals, boys may be targeted in different contexts—such as gaming platforms and institutions as well as out in the neighbourhood—and their victimization can often be overlooked or unrecognized due to social norms around masculinity.⁴ Indeed, professionals also noted that exploitation and abuse against boys often remained hidden due to stigma around masculinity and sexual victimization, which aligns with other child sexual abuse research.⁵ The underreporting of exploitation and abuse against boys can further embolden perpetrators in these settings.

In Pakistan, tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse of children is deeply shaped by sociocultural norms, gender hierarchies, poverty and rapid digital expansion without corresponding safeguards. Insights from interviews with professionals reveal the complex ways in which perpetrators exploit technology to harm children in Pakistan, often subjecting the same child to multiple forms of exploitation or abuse. These insights build on the quantitative findings to present a complex picture of how children can be exploited and abused using technology. Because these findings are informed by the perceptions of professionals, they can provide an important part of the picture, but they have not been contrasted or validated with the perspectives of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse who, as described in the methods section of this report, were not able to participate in the qualitative research.

In-person child sexual abuse and production of child sexual abuse material

Interview data point to a close link between in-person child sexual abuse (often described by interviewees as rape) and the production of child sexual abuse material. In some instances, in-person child sexual abuse was committed specifically to produce child sexual abuse material. In others, perpetrators recorded abuse to obtain financial gain, either by blackmailing the child or selling the content online. In these ways, technology becomes embedded within the abuse itself, enabling ongoing abuse beyond the initial incident.

Professionals described instances where children were subjected to in-person sexual abuse for the purpose of producing child sexual abuse material. For example, a front-line worker recounted a case in which a father exposed his 12–13-year-old to adult pornographic content before abusing her to create child sexual abuse videos. He then threatened to

4 ECPAT International (2025). Case study: Child Rights Group of the Pakistan Paediatric Association, Pakistan. Bangkok: ECPAT International. [CBI_CaseStudy_Pakistan_2025August.pdf](#), accessed 28/05/2026.

5 War Against Rape (WAR). (2021). *Fact Sheet on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence 2020-2021*. Karachi: War Against Rape.

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share the material with family members to coerce her into further exploitation and abuse and the production of additional sexual content (FW). In this incident, technology enabled exploitation and abuse in several ways: the child was first exposed to sexual content, which in itself constitutes a criminal offence,⁶ and then pressured to replicate specific acts, facilitating the in-person abuse committed by the father. Threats of sharing recorded material were then used to coerce continued compliance, so the recording itself kept facilitating continuous harm. In another instance, a 6-year-old girl was abused by a neighbour and a recording of the abuse was shared on a WhatsApp group dedicated to sharing child sexual abuse material.

In addition to offences relating to in-person child sexual abuse, Pakistani law criminalizes a broad range of activities related to child sexual abuse material. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act criminalizes producing, offering, making available, distributing, transmitting through information systems, procuring and possessing material that visually depicts a child engaged in sexually explicit conduct.⁷ Penalties are particularly severe, ranging from 14 to 20 years in prison.⁸ However, important limitations remain in the way the law defines and addresses this form of harm.



Spotlight: Child sexual abuse material in Pakistani legislation: definition, gaps and terminology

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act continues to use the outdated term 'child pornography' to refer to child sexual abuse material. Although still present in many legal systems, this terminology is inappropriate and misleading, as it implies that images or recordings of child sexual abuse are a form of pornography. This framing risks diminishing the seriousness of the abuse, trivializing harm or implicitly legitimizing acts that constitute sexual exploitation and/or abuse of children. The term 'child sexual abuse material' should therefore be used instead, as it more accurately reflects the nature of the harm involved.⁹

The scope of the legal definition also remains limited. The offence excludes non-visual forms of abusive material such as audio-only content, and is therefore not fully aligned with that of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, which covers "any representation, by whatever means."¹⁰ Although language aligned with the Optional Protocol was introduced in 2023, when the term 'child sexual abuse content' was added to Section 2 of the Act on Definitions,¹¹ the substantive offence provisions have not been amended accordingly, leaving inconsistencies in both terminology and the scope of material covered.

In addition to the above, the Act does not criminalize mere access to child sexual abuse material. This creates a loophole that allows individuals to intentionally seek out and view such content online, including non-consensually shared material, without legal consequences, ultimately fuelling its continued circulation and undermining efforts to reduce demand. Lastly, although the transmission of child sexual abuse material through an information system is criminalized,¹² this may not be sufficient to cover the livestreaming of child sexual abuse in cases where no actual 'material' is created, downloaded or stored.

6 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 21.

7 Ibid., section 22.

8 Ibid.

9 See Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children (2025). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Second Edition](#). Bangkok: ECPAT International.

10 United Nations General Assembly (2000). [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography](#). Art 2(c).

11 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), Section 2(1)(vib).

12 Ibid., section 22.

While technology can be used to escalate or extend in-person abuse, it can also begin online before moving into in-person child sexual abuse and exploitation. For example, six children surveyed reported being offered money or gifts online in return for sexual images or videos of themselves, while four children reported being offered money or gifts online to meet someone in person to do something sexual. The latter conduct may fall within the scope of the 2023 amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, which criminalize the use of an information system for the purpose of sexually exploiting a child through the payment of money or other benefits to the child or to another person. Penalties range from 14 to 20 years' imprisonment.¹³ However, the provision does not cover situations where the payment is simply promised, creating a potential accountability gap at the contact stage or in cases where payment ultimately does not occur.

Although reported by a minority of respondents, these experiences reflect known pathways through which online contact can transition into in-person abuse or exploitation. Front-line workers and justice professionals described cases in which perpetrators groomed children online to obtain sexual content, which was then used to blackmail the children into meeting them in person. A police investigator, for example, described a case where a perpetrator groomed a 14–15-year-old girl into producing sexual content involving her sister, later using this material to blackmail both sisters into meeting him in person, where they were sexually abused.

“

Gradually, that man, using those pictures and videos, established a physical relationship with the other sister as well—blackmailing her, blackmailing both of them. He told the first girl: ‘Convince your sister also to get involved with me, then I will leave you alone.’ (JP)

”

In another case, a front-line worker described an incident involving two adolescent classmates who began sharing self-generated sexual content with each other via Instagram and Snapchat using their parents' phones. After meeting in person, the boy recorded them having sex and later shared the content among peers, who then used it to blackmail and further sexually abuse the girl.

It should be noted that, in this case, both classmates could have potentially faced prosecution from the outset, as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act's provisions on child sexual abuse material do not exempt the voluntary creation or sharing of self-generated sexual material by children from criminal responsibility.¹⁴ This leaves children aged 10 and above¹⁵ at risk of being prosecuted for non-malicious behaviour arising from sexual exploration, trust or peer interaction. This risk must also be considered in the broader context of Pakistani law, under which consensual sexual relations outside of marriage are prohibited,¹⁶ potentially exposing children involved in consensual sexual activity to criminal liability not only for the creation or sharing of self-generated sexual content, but also for the underlying sexual conduct itself.

Children were also described as being lured into meetings through offers that did not initially appear sexual. A front-line worker recounted a case where a child was contacted through an online game (PUBG) and offered money for their high-ranking gaming account ID; the child was then sexually abused when they met in person. Similarly, a police inspector described the grooming of an 11–12-year-old boy on Facebook by a 27-year-old man who offered him gifts to persuade him to meet:

¹³ Ibid., section 22B.

¹⁴ Ibid., section 22.

¹⁵ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1860). [Penal Code](#), sections 82–83.

¹⁶ Ibid., section 496B.

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“

The offender lured him with promises, saying things like, ‘If you come to me, I will buy you a watch, I will get you shoes.’ We later read this entire exchange on Messenger. The boy eventually fell into his trap. Without telling his parents, he went to meet the offender. (FW)

”

In both cases, perpetrators recorded or photographed the abuse, with material later shared with peers or sold online. Children may also be taken by force or drugged in order to facilitate and record in-person sexual abuse. A justice professional described a case in which a 14–15-year-old boy was drugged by multiple perpetrators (some were adults and some peers) at a tutoring centre; the abuse was recorded and used to blackmail the boy into enduring further abuse. The video was later shared on a unspecified social media platform.

Another case involved a 7–8-year-old boy who was lured to a secluded location by a 22-year-old young man and sexually abused and recorded. The perpetrator then distributed the video via WhatsApp to the child’s mother and threatened relatives through fake social media accounts to demand payment. The mother described the harrowing experience of noticing acute changes to her child’s mental and physical health without explanation, before receiving the threats from perpetrators:

“

She [the mother] said, ‘He did not go to tuition [tutoring classes, to explain the child was not well], the very next day I received a video on my WhatsApp, and they demanded money from me. They said if you don’t pay, we will spread this video all over the village. And they probably already sent it to some people’. (FW)

”

Overall, these accounts illustrate how technology and contact sexual abuse intersect along a continuum of violence. Digital tools may facilitate grooming, enable recording and circulation, and provide perpetrators with leverage to prolong exploitation and abuse through blackmail, extortion and ongoing coercion.

Grooming

This subsection describes some of the ways in which perpetrators in Pakistan may establish or build a relationship with a child for the purpose of sexually abusing or exploiting them. In many cases described by professionals, grooming was a central mechanism through which perpetrators initiated and escalated exploitation and abuse. Grooming often served as the entry point for obtaining sexual content or arranging in-person meetings. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act expressly covers both types of conduct. It criminalizes the intentional establishment of, or steps taken towards establishing, a relationship of trust with a child through electronic communications for the purpose of facilitating, soliciting, or committing sexual abuse, or producing, sharing or facilitating the distribution of child sexual abuse material. Penalties for this offence range from 5 to 10 years’ imprisonment.¹⁷

Survey findings indicate that a proportion of children aged 12–17 in Pakistan experienced early forms of sexualized communication that may reflect grooming dynamics. For example, 6 children reported being asked to talk about sex or sexual acts when they did not want to, and 11 children reported being asked to share an image or video showing their private parts when they did not want to. While these figures represent a minority of respondents, they align with professionals’ accounts of perpetrators using gradual, manipulative strategies to sexualize communication and test boundaries.

Front-line workers and justice professionals noted that grooming processes may unfold over extended periods, sometimes lasting several (six to eight) months. Perpetrators may begin by befriending children, offering attention, building trust or gradually desensitizing them through

¹⁷ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 22A.

increasingly personal (e.g., friend's contacts) or sexualized requests (FW). In some cases, they may groom children with the promise of a job (JP). Perpetrators were also described as pretending to be peers or adolescents themselves (FW, JP), enabling them to gain children's trust more easily. An incident described by a front-line worker reflects how gradual the grooming process can be:

“

They would also chat about food ‘I’m eating this, what are you eating?’—that kind of thing. Then the ‘girl’ [perpetrator was impersonating a close-in-age girl] started sending her normal pictures to the child; the child sent his pictures as well. After gaining his trust over time, she began asking about his school, about his friends; his friends’ IDs and accounts were identified; she befriended them too, so mutual friends appeared between them. After that, the ID [perpetrator ID on Snapchat] began demanding explicit content from the boy, ‘Send me this kind of content’. (FW)

”

Others initiated grooming by sending sexual content of their own, with the aim of normalizing sexual exchanges and encouraging children to reciprocate. These behaviours are considered crimes under national law. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act criminalizes sending a child photographs or videos depicting a person engaged in sexually explicit conduct through an information system and with the intent to harm. Perpetrators face up to seven years in prison.¹⁸ In addition, the Penal Code punishes exposing a child to obscene and sexually explicitly material with the same penalty.¹⁹ Despite these legal prohibitions, survey findings reflect instances of children receiving sexual images in Pakistan, with 3 per cent of children (N=30) reporting that someone had sent them sexual images they did not want. Research conducted in other countries as part of the Disrupting Harm project has shown that unwanted sexual exposure may sometimes serve as an early point of contact in grooming processes.²⁰

Where children resisted requests to reciprocate, perpetrators often employed manipulative strategies designed to provoke shame or insecurity. One tactic used by a perpetrator involved challenging the child's refusal by implying inadequacy or shame. For instance, if the child did not comply, the perpetrator would respond by saying:

“

You’re not a male, you’re probably a female, that’s why you’re afraid; you don’t want to show your content because maybe you don’t have anything like that. (FW)

”

In this case, the perpetrator reframed the request for sexual images as a challenge to the child's masculinity, compelling the child to comply to avoid shame. Such strategies exploit adolescent insecurities around identity, self-image and social belonging.

Perpetrators may also escalate from grooming into harassment and intimidation once children attempt to disengage. A front-line worker described a case in which man in his early 20s used grooming tactics to obtain sexual content from a 15–16-year-old girl via a gaming platform (PUGB), Instagram and WhatsApp. When the girl blocked him on each platform, he created multiple accounts to continue harassing and terrorizing her into meeting him in person. He also sent un-solicited fast-food deliveries to her home as a means of asserting control and instilling fear.

This case illustrates how grooming is not merely persuasive but can quickly become coercive and threatening. In addition to grooming, under Pakistani law, the behaviour of the perpetrator in this case could also amount to cyberbullying, legally defined as the sending of electronic messages, including via social media platforms or instant messaging services, with the intent to harass, threaten or target a child. Penalties range

¹⁸ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), sections 21(1)(b), 21(2).

¹⁹ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1860). [Penal Code](#), section 292A.

²⁰ ECPAT, INTERPOL and UNICEF (2026). [Disrupting Harm in Brazil: Evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse](#). Safe Online.

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from one to five years in prison.²¹ The cyberstalking provisions also impose the same maximum penalty for repeatedly contacting a child to foster personal interaction, despite the child clearly indicated that they are not interested.²²

Professionals also emphasized that grooming frequently involves material incentives in contrast to threats and fear. Children may be offered money, gifts or other benefits, which can initially appear unrelated to sexual abuse. The survey data reflect this dynamic: 10 children reported being offered money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos of themselves. These offers may serve as a precursor to other types of exploitation, particularly when children are economically or structurally vulnerable or lack awareness of perpetrators' intentions.

Promises of marriage were also described as a grooming tactic, particularly in cases involving adolescent girls. A front-line worker and a justice professional noted that perpetrators sometimes framed abusive relationships as romantic or marriage-oriented to secure compliance and normalize exploitation:

“

She made friends with him over social media, they started talking and it went as far as marriage talk—that ‘we will get married’. The girl agreed. She even told her mother about it (...) They first met on Facebook, then started talking on WhatsApp, and later they met in person. He made some videos of her, and he took some photos too. (FW)

”

In another case, a man in his late 20s groomed a 14-year-old girl over several months. A front-line worker explained that through this grooming process, he obtained sexual content, sexually abused her in person and blackmailed her to meet him in person again to escalate the exploitation and abuse:

“

Over time, through consistent manipulation and ‘brainstorming’ [brainwashing], he convinced her to such an extent that she was ready to leave her home and parents for him (...) After eight or ten months it was found out that she had this friendship, and the boy used to have long conversations with her. Later, when we dug it out, we came to know that this was the process that had happened. So, he started grooming the girl and realized that he could trap her. (FW)

”

Finally, a few professionals reflected on how some people – including religious leaders, law enforcement personnel, teachers, domestic workers and relatives – exploited their position or authority to groom children and facilitate exploitation and abuse. In Pakistani communities where children are socialized to obey their elders and authority is rarely questioned, such relationships can provide perpetrators with credibility, access and control, both in person and online. At the same time, these positions of authority also represent critical entry points for prevention and protection when exercised responsibly. Trusted authority figures can play a key role in shifting harmful norms, recognizing early signs of exploitation and abuse and creating safe pathways for disclosure. However, this requires clear safeguarding standards, accountability mechanisms and training to ensure that authority is used to protect rather than control.

Sexual extortion

As evidenced in some of the cases described above, child sexual abuse material produced through in-person sexual abuse is frequently used as a tool for sexual extortion in Pakistan. Interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals point to a vicious cycle in which the initial incident of abuse is recorded and is then used to blackmail children into further exploitation and abuse.

²¹ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 24(A).

²² Ibid., section 24(2).

Survey findings underscore the prevalence of these dynamics. Six children reported that someone had threatened to share sexual images or videos of them, while one child reported that sexual images had been shared without their permission. In addition, four children reported being threatened or blackmailed into engaging in sexual activities, highlighting that coercion and intimidation are present even if underreported.

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act does not explicitly address tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children. However, some cases may fall under existing provisions criminalizing transmitting any information that intimidates a child with a sexually explicit image or video for the purpose of blackmail. Perpetrators of this crime face up to 7 years in prison, extendable to 10 years for a repeat offence.²³ While this shows that the current framework does enable prosecution, amending these provisions to better capture the specific harm and methods involved, namely the coercive use of self-generated sexual material to extort money or sexual acts/material from a child, would allow for a more accurate legal characterization of sexual extortion.

Cases described by front-line workers provide further insight into how this form of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse unfolds in practice. One front-line worker supported a 14-year-old girl who was groomed online by an adult man (estimated age 25–30). Over time, the perpetrator sexually abused her in person and recorded the abuse. He then used the material to threaten her with exposure to her family and friends, which prolonged the exploitation and abuse and prevented her from seeking help. In these cases, as perpetrators create more content involving the child, they gain additional leverage to commit further abuse.

In another case, a young man known to a girl through school developed an online relationship with her. After inviting her to his home, he secretly recorded sexual material and later used it to blackmail her into further exploitation and abuse:

“

Eventually, he shared the videos with friends, who then also began to misuse [sexually abuse her in person] the girl. (FW)

”

A front-line worker and several justice professionals also described cases in which sexual images were taken without the child’s knowledge during consensual sex or in private settings such as bathrooms. In these incidents, perpetrators weaponized the material to pressure children into additional acts, continued contact or financial demands.

Survey results further reflect these patterns of coercion: 10 children reported being asked to share an image or video of their private parts when they did not want to, indicating that unwanted solicitation can be a precursor to extortion. A defining feature of the Pakistani context is the weaponization of shame (*sharam*) and honour (*izzat*). Perpetrators deliberately exploit children’s fear of parental reaction, social stigma and moral judgment, knowing that disclosure may result in punishment, social exclusion or even violence against the child, particularly for girls. This fear significantly delays or prevents reporting and enables prolonged cycles of abuse and extortion.

Perpetrators may sexualize children’s non-explicit images to use them as material for extortion. Getting access to a non-sexual picture may be equally harmful for the child, as explained by a justice professional:

“

The images in question weren’t nude or explicitly sexual, but in our tribal society, even a simple photo going public – whether on an app or social media – can be a huge stigma. He told me that someone had obtained her picture and started making various demands via phone calls and messages. (JP)

”

²³ Ibid., section 21.

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In another instance, a justice professional recalled that a perpetrator accessed a non-explicit picture of a girl and a boy socializing at a birthday celebration. The perpetrator used the picture to attempt to extort the girl by telling her:

“

‘I will send this to your father, I will send this to your mother, I will tag you on WhatsApp’... So, she was so upset, so distressed, that she was ready to commit suicide. She said, ‘My home environment is so conservative, so strict, that if anyone finds out, if any person comes to know that my picture is with some boy in this way, then what will happen?’. (JP)

”

This example highlights the importance of understanding the different meaning that can be assigned to images across contexts and the ways in which these can be used by perpetrators to create social transgressions that can be leveraged through fear. It may be that children are operating in numerous social worlds enabled by technology that have vastly different values to the ones they operate in with their parents and family. When these social worlds are kept separate, they may be able to safely navigate them, however the differences can be exploited by perpetrators who understand and capitalize on the differences. So, while an image of a boy and a girl at a birthday party seems safe to post on social media for young people in one social world, this image can be transformed into a social transgression to be used against them in another.

Indeed, most perpetrators exploit children’s fear of parents or families finding out that they shared their sexual or sexualized content or that they were abused. Perpetrators use this fear as a primary tool of coercion, impeding children from speaking and seeking help:

“

Fear also plays a role — children comply because they are threatened with exposure to their parents. (JP)

”

Extortion is frequently financial. Interviews described cases where perpetrators demanded money in exchange for not sharing sexual material, while six children reported being offered money or gifts in exchange for sexual images or videos and four children reported being offered money or gifts to meet in person to do something sexual.

One front-line worker, for example, supported a 15-year-old girl who had been in contact with an older man, whom she met via Facebook, then established contact with on WhatsApp and met in person. During their relationship of two to three years, he recorded sexual content, which he later used to extort money and force continued meetings, threatening to send the material to her father and brother if she refused:

“

‘Give me this amount of money, otherwise I will send these pictures to your brother, to your father. Give me money and also meet me again.’ She said, ‘I don’t have money. As for meeting, I had mentally prepared myself that maybe I could meet him, but I don’t have the money to give.’ (FW)

”

In another case, a justice professional defended a girl (described as being below 18 years of age) who was groomed through an online game and later contacted via Snapchat and WhatsApp. The perpetrator obtained sexual content, demanded PKR 50,000 and coerced the girl into an in-person meeting during which she was raped and recorded. The material was then used for continuous further financial extortion:

“

Eventually, he lured her to meet in person, where he sexually abused her and recorded even more explicit videos– worse than the online ones. He continued to harass the family, demanding even more money. (JP)

”

Accounts from two professionals indicate that teachers and tutors have requested payment and sexual content from children in exchange for better grades. In one such case, a 14–15-year-old girl was in contact with an online tutor (of unspecified age) to prepare for her exams. The tutor offered to speak to his contacts at the exam board if she sent him PKR 20,000. Since the girl could only send him PKR 5,000, the perpetrator demanded she send him her sexual content. These examples demonstrate another way that power and influence can be used by perpetrators to subject children to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. They further reinforce the need for programming and policy approaches that consider the various contexts in which children can be subjected to these types of exploitation and abuse, often within the realms of their daily education or community.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how sexual extortion operates as both a continuation of abuse and a mechanism for escalation. Technology enables perpetrators not only to record and store harm, but to repeatedly exploit the existence – or even the possibility – of sexual material to control, silence and further abuse children.

Artificial intelligence- generated child sexual abuse material

The rise of artificial intelligence image-generation tools has introduced new and urgent challenges in addressing tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Increasingly embedded in apps and online platforms, these tools can be used to generate fake sexual material depicting a child, meaning that they can be portrayed in sexually explicit ways without their consent or even their knowledge.

Even when it portrays non-existent children, child sexual abuse material generated through artificial intelligence can normalize exploitative representations and contribute to increased demand for child sexual abuse material involving real children. Although this form of exploitation and abuse is still emerging, evidence shows that it is already occurring in Pakistan.

Indeed, interviewees indicated that children are also subjected to blackmail by perpetrators using fake sexual images. A judge reflected on a case where a girl (of unspecified age) was blackmailed by someone who used her Instagram and TikTok pictures to create fake sexual content of her and threatened her with sharing the material if she did not comply with his demand (which was of a sexual nature, though it is unclear if it was to meet in person or to send sexual content). Survey findings indicate that 12 children reported that someone had used artificial intelligence to create fake sexual images or videos of them, suggesting the emergence of new forms of technology-enabled coercion. While such material can be used to intimidate or blackmail children, Pakistani legislation does not clearly address the full range of conduct involved in the production and sharing of child sexual abuse material generated through digital technologies, including artificial intelligence-powered tools. For example, the definition of child sexual abuse material²⁴ does not explicitly include digitally generated content, including material created through artificial intelligence or manipulated to simulate a child involved in sexual activity. Although the existing wording may be broad enough to cover some of these cases, the lack of explicit reference can create legal uncertainty in how the law is interpreted and applied. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act does include a related provision that prohibits the intentional and public exhibition, display or transmission of any information that superimposes a photograph of a child’s face onto a sexually explicit image or video for the purpose of blackmail.²⁵ Nonetheless, these provisions target only the dissemination of such material, not its creation.

²⁴ Ibid., section 22.

²⁵ Ibid., sections 21(1)(a), 21(2).

1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN

Previously the Penal Code contained a broader definition of child sexual abuse material that included computer-generated images that appear to show a child engaging in sexually explicit conduct, including material created, adapted or modified to depict an identifiable child.²⁶ However, this provision was repealed in 2023.²⁷ Reintroducing

a similar approach in the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act would strengthen legal certainty and provide a clear statutory basis to prosecute the creation, dissemination and possession of digitally generated or manipulated child sexual abuse material, including content created through artificial intelligence.



Spotlight: Intersection between intimate partner violence and tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

A few professionals identified a series of intersections between intimate partner violence (e.g., between parents) and tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. One professional referred to a case whereby sexual content recorded consensually between two parents was distributed by the father via their child's Facebook account as a form of revenge towards the mother, and the child saw the content. In another case, a perpetrator shared sexual content of a woman with her children and other family members. The mother and her daughters were expelled from the house after the incident and the perpetrator continued to abuse her and her daughters online, as explained by the professional:

“

I feel like there is such a perpetual cycle of violence, which is why I feel it is so important to have this conversation and to talk to people. Stopping this is absolutely necessary. (JP)

”

Cases such as these highlight ways that tech-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation may intersect with other types of violence in Pakistan, including intimate partner and gender-based violence. Further research is required to understand the nature and scope of these intersecting forms of violence.

Taken together, the findings outlined in this section highlight that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan must be understood not as isolated online incidents but as part of a continuum of violence experienced in everyday social, familial and educational contexts.

Perpetrators and settings of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse

Survey findings highlight that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan is most often perpetrated by individuals already within children's social environments, rather than by strangers. This aligns with interview accounts

showing that digital technologies frequently extend exploitation and abuse that are rooted in in-person relationships and everyday settings.

Among occurrences where children reported knowing the perpetrator, friends or acquaintances were the most frequently identified group. In 24 per cent of occurrences, the perpetrator was a friend or acquaintance aged 18 or older (N=19), while 11 per cent involved friends or acquaintances under 18 (N=8). Interviews with professionals illustrated instances of these dynamics in practice. As described above, professionals often support children who have been subjected to tech-facilitated sexual abuse or exploitation by

²⁶ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1860). [Penal Code](#), footnote 119.

²⁷ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2023). [Act No. XXXVII of 2023 to amend the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016, Pakistan Penal Code and the Qanun-e-Shahadat, 1984](#), section 13.

people they considered friends or acquaintances, including classmates, tutors, teachers and neighbours.

Romantic or intimate partners aged 18 or older accounted for 10 per cent of occurrences (N=8), underscoring how adolescent relationships and power imbalances can be exploited through digital coercion. Family members were also reported as perpetrators. In 5 per cent of occurrences, the perpetrator was a family member aged 18 or older (N=4), and a family member under 18 was identified in another 5 per cent (N=4). Only 15 per cent of occurrences involved someone the child did not know prior to the abuse (N=11), reinforcing the finding that like the dynamics of child sexual abuse and exploitation, most harm is perpetrated by individuals within a child's existing social world rather than anonymous online strangers. Most children identified a single perpetrator (96 per cent of occurrences, N=50), though a small proportion (4 per cent, N=2) involved multiple perpetrators. In cases where children were asked where they first encountered the perpetrator, responses illustrated the overlap between online and in-person environments. Children reported first meeting the perpetrator on the internet (28 per cent, N=8),

at home (19 per cent, N=6), in a public space (23 per cent, N=7) or at school (4 per cent, N=1). These findings suggest that digital platforms often connect children to perpetrators, but exploitation and abuse are also rooted in familiar physical spaces, including the home.

Nearly 44 per cent of all occurrences took place exclusively online (N=34), while 5 per cent occurred both online and in person (N=4). Social media was the most commonly reported digital environment, accounting for 44 per cent of occurrences (N=34), followed by online games (5 per cent, N=4). Snapchat and WhatsApp were the most reported platforms, each accounting for 39 per cent of occurrences (N=13 and N=14, respectively), reflecting the central role of private messaging applications in facilitating exploitation and abuse, coercion and the circulation of sexual content.

Together, these findings reinforce the finding that tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan is rarely confined to anonymous online spaces. Rather, it is embedded in children's everyday relationships and environments, with digital tools enabling exploitation and abuse to occur, escalate and persist across settings.

1. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN



Spotlight: Exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peers

With several cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peers, it is relevant to note that Pakistan sets the age of criminal responsibility at 10,²⁸ which is considered relatively low by international standards.²⁹ However, children aged 10 to 13 may be exempt from prosecution if the court determines that they lack sufficient maturity to understand the nature and consequences of their actions.³⁰ Children involved in judicial proceedings as suspects of criminal offences are entitled to the special protections outlined in the Juvenile Justice System Act.³¹

Several elements of the framework set by the law are positive from a child-rights perspective. Children in conflict with the law have the right to free legal representation,³² and may only be interrogated by a senior police officer assisted by a probation or social welfare officer.³³ Hearings are generally closed to the public³⁴ and disclosing any information that could reveal the child's identity carries a three-year prison sentence.³⁵

In addition, some offences committed by children under 16, including 'cyberbullying',³⁶ 'cyberstalking',³⁷ and offences related to child sexual abuse material³⁸ and sexual extortion³⁹ may be settled through diversion with the consent of the victim of the crime. The Juvenile Justice Committee may then issue a reprimand or order reparation; a written or oral apology; community service; payment of fines and legal costs; or placement in a Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre.⁴⁰

At the same time, there are several limitations in the legal framework. The very low age of criminal responsibility can raise particular concerns in the context of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse offences. Setting the threshold at 10 years old means that very young children can potentially become involved in the criminal justice system for behaviours that may reflect limited digital literacy, lack of full understanding of the consequences of online actions, peer pressure, etc. In such situations, a purely punitive approach risks criminalizing behaviours that may be more appropriately addressed through education, counselling and child protection measures. In addition, several forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act are not eligible for diversion, as they carry maximum prison penalties exceeding seven years, which limits opportunities for restorative or rehabilitative responses in cases involving exploitation and abuse perpetrated by children.

28 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1860). [Penal Code](#), section 82.

29 See United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019). [General comment No. 24 \(2019\) on children's rights in the child justice system](#), paragraphs 20 to 24.

30 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1860). [Penal Code](#), section 83.

31 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2018). [Juvenile Justice System Act](#).

32 Ibid., sections 3(1), 3(3).

33 Ibid., section 7.

34 Ibid., section 11(2).

35 Ibid., section 13(1).

36 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), Section 24(A).

37 Ibid., section 24(2).

38 Ibid., section 22.

39 Ibid., section 21.

40 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2018). [Juvenile Justice System Act](#), sections 2(m), 9.

2. IMPACTS



2. IMPACTS

Interviews with front-line workers and justice professionals show that the impacts of tech-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. This section outlines the impacts of tech-facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation on children and families as described by professionals working directly to support them.

Social withdrawal, distress and isolation

One of the earliest manifestations of sexual exploitation and abuse professionals observed was a noticeable shift in children's behaviour and routines. Children subjected to exploitation and abuse may become unusually quiet, withdraw from loved ones or isolate themselves socially. Front-line workers and justice professionals also reported disruptions in eating habits, declining concentration in school, loss of interest in daily activities, nightmares and difficulty sleeping.

In many cases, these behavioural changes were misunderstood within families. Academic underperformance, withdrawal or irritability may be interpreted as disobedience or lack of effort rather than possible indicators of exploitation and abuse, particularly in contexts where awareness of child mental health and sexual abuse remains limited. This can unintentionally deepen children's emotional burden and further weaken trust within the home. Blame from family members can retraumatize the child, as noted by one justice professional:

“

If the child feels they are being blamed for what happened– that it wasn't the perpetrator's fault, but their own mistake –then that guilt stays forever: 'Why did I go there? Why did I do that? Why didn't I tell anyone?' This kind of lifelong trauma affects the child's development into adulthood. (JP)

”

This results in adverse childhood experiences causing serious harm to a child's well-being, including guilt, self-blame, anxiety, depression and reduced help-seeking, increasing the risk of repeated exploitation and abuse, and even suicide. The impact is gender biased: girls face heightened stigma, restrictions and long-term consequences due to the linking of family honour with female sexuality. Boys, meanwhile, are discouraged from disclosing exploitation and abuse due to rigid norms of masculinity, where victimization is viewed as weakness. Together, these dynamics undermine child protection and reinforce cycles of harm. According to one front-line worker, this may be especially the case when the perpetrator is from within the child's social circle, such as family and acquaintances.

Technology can intensify isolation by creating a sense of constant exposure and helplessness. Shared phone use creates a lack of privacy, generational power gaps and limited alternative spaces for private disclosure, which can leave children feeling that they have nowhere – either online or in person – to seek support. In Pakistan, where open discussion of sexuality is stigmatized, children may also lack the language to describe what has happened, reinforcing silence and emotional withdrawal.

Professionals describe the intense pain, shock and distress parents experience upon learning that their child has been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Many parents blame themselves and in some cases, either due to the pain their child experiences and/or due to the shame communities subject them to, have thoughts of physically harming themselves and occasionally do. Some parents choose to move away to preserve their dignity after feeling humiliated by the community because of the exploitation and abuse. The loss of community and livelihood resulting from the relocation may lead to further distress and depression. Parents' emotional responses in Pakistan are shaped by grief, guilt and fear of social disgrace. Many parents internalize blame, believing they failed to protect their child, while simultaneously fearing community judgment. This emotional turmoil may impair their ability to support the child effectively, reinforcing cycles of silence and distress.

Similarly, families of children, including siblings, who were subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may be blamed for the abuse and people in their community may judge them by saying:

“

They didn't keep watch on their child, they didn't give their child proper upbringing, that's why this happened. (FW)

”

Parents are held accountable for the exploitation and abuse their children were subjected to and because of it, their extended kinship may ignore, blame them or reject them. Instead of providing support, as one professional explained:

“

Society often looked down on them, blaming them, saying 'This happened to you'. (FW)

”

Families in Pakistan often experience collective stigma, as exploitation and abuse are 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 blame may escalate into domestic violence, abandonment or divorce, further destabilizing the child's environment. In one case described by a professional, the child's mother faced an additional emotional burden as family members accused her of neglect, saying:

“

You don't take care of your children; you don't pay attention to them.” Her husband reinforced this blame, telling her, 'What an incompetent mother you are, that such a serious incident happened while you were present'. (FW)

”

According to one justice professional, blaming the mother can go as far as physical violence from the father and divorce. Extended family and community responses frequently prioritize silence over support. Families who seek legal redress may face intensified scrutiny, social boycott or pressure to withdraw cases, reinforcing isolation and discouraging accountability.

Fear and loss of safety

Professionals described pervasive fear as a common consequence of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse. Children may feel unsafe not only in relation to the perpetrator, but also within school, family life and their wider community. This sense of threat can disrupt their ability to imagine a future or maintain a sense of stability. As one front-line worker explained:

“

They stop thinking about their future. Normally, children say, 'I want to be this when I grow up', but such children stop thinking like that altogether. So, it's not just the present that is ruined, but the future of the child also deteriorates, as they stop paying attention to or investing in it. Counselling for the child is extremely important, and educating the parents is also essential. (FW)

”

One professional reflecting on a case involving a teenage boy noted how exploitation and abuse can fundamentally erode trust and confidence:

“

If a 14-year-old child loses trust...then many things ahead in their life become more difficult – the pressure of society, the pressure of relatives, the pressure of family. (FW)

”

Fear is often compounded by the perception that sexual content may still be circulating online. Even the belief that a video or image exists can generate extreme anxiety, school avoidance and persistent hypervigilance:

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“

The child developed such intense fear that he thought if he left the house, people would recognize him, even though in reality they didn't. The perpetrator had told him, 'I have sent this video to everyone.' This fear took such a toll on him that he stopped studying, became afraid of going out, and even dreaded going to school. On the days he was absent, it was later found that he had left home for school but did not actually go there – instead, he hid in some corner, in the market or neighbourhood, because he did not want his classmates to see him. (FW)

”

Despite the profound harm caused by the continued circulation of child sexual abuse material, Pakistani law imposes few obligations on the digital sector to curb its dissemination. In particular, online platforms are not mandated to block or remove such content; nor are internet service providers required to report it to the authorities.⁴¹ This limited regulatory framework is not conducive to positioning digital service providers as active allies in the prevention of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. Instead, it results in a system in which platforms are not clearly assigned responsibility for identifying, mitigating or preventing risks to children within their services. A child-rights-based approach to online safety requires stronger and more proactive obligations on digital service providers to integrate safety-by-design measures into the development and operation of their services. This includes conducting child-rights and safety risk assessments, implementing privacy-by-default settings for child users to limit public visibility and unwanted contact, strengthening safeguards around content recommendation systems to reduce children's exposure to

sexualized or exploitative material and limiting the collection and profiling of children's personal data, as well as establishing clear safeguards to address artificial intelligence-enabled risks. Embedding these safeguards into platform design and architecture can help prevent harm before it occurs, reduce opportunities for grooming, coercion and non-consensual distribution of sexual content, and create safer digital environments for children.

Stigma, honour and community-level consequences

As outlined above, professionals emphasized that the impacts of exploitation and abuse are shaped profoundly by social norms linked to honour and shame. Children and families may fear that disclosure will bring dishonour, punishment or long-term reputational damage, making reporting feel socially harmful. A front-line worker described the slow process of building the confidence of a girl who feared rejection by her family after she was abused:

“

She kept feeling that if she passed on the information, her reputation would be damaged, or her family would be told, and she might be harmed by her family... Still, she hesitated to reconnect with her family. She feared that if she returned to contact with them, first their dishonour and shame would come that all this had happened to their daughter, and second, they might not accept her at all. These were all the fears that I had to control. (FW)

”

Professionals also highlighted that stigma often extends beyond the child to the entire household. Families may face blame, social exclusion, and community judgment:

⁴¹ See International Center for Missing and Exploited Children (2023). [Child Sexual Abuse Material: Model Legislation & Global Review](#), 67.

“

The child becomes limited, and the family also becomes limited. They start living in a very restricted environment, mentally depressed. They cannot discuss it with anyone. Instead of support, they face denial from society. Instead of empathy, they get taunts. And so, they are forced to live in a confined, limited space. (FW)

”

This collective stigma can shape decisions to remain silent, withdraw from social life or even relocate entirely to avoid exposure.

Long-term constraints and harmful social responses

Professionals described how stigma can have lasting implications for education, marriage prospects, mobility and social inclusion – particularly for girls, whose sexuality is closely tied to family honour. Professionals talked about the enduring impacts of stigma throughout their lives:

“

...Stigma stays with them for life, affecting marriage, education and parenting. (JP)

”

Some families respond by restricting girls' movement, withdrawing them from school, or pressuring them into early or forced marriage as a means of “restoring honour” (FW). Parents may also contribute to the isolation of children by not allowing them to leave the house and depriving them of life opportunities (JP). Due to stigma, families may decide to move to other communities which may further isolate children from relatives, friends and familiar environments (JP). In some cases, parents may distance themselves from the child or even force them out of the home (FW). One justice professional recounted a case where the child was killed by the family due to dishonour

and shame resulting from disclosure of sexual exploitation and abuse. This is illustrated by a front-line worker who recalled the impact of these pressures on families:

“

They are forced by the pressure of society. Because of that, the chances of child marriages – forced marriages – increase a lot, because families say, ‘We must protect our honour, so let’s marry her off quickly.’ This becomes very common. (FW)

”

Boys, while also stigmatized, face a different form of silencing. Cultural expectations of masculinity discourage disclosure, leading to under-recognition of boys as victims of sexual abuse, despite the law clearly applying to all children. This issue is further compounded by the fact that same-sex sexual activity is criminalized in Pakistan,⁴² which may discourage boys from reporting due to fears of stigma, criminal liability or being perceived as complicit in the abuse. Exploitation and abuse of boys is often minimized, denied or reframed as experimentation, leaving trauma unaddressed and increasing the risk of long-term psychological harm.

Physical and psychological consequences

Professionals also described the multiple physical impacts exploitation and abuse may have. In cases involving in-person abuse, they referred to the physical impacts of rape, including unintended pregnancies, miscarriages forced abortions and in some cases, the death of the child. For girls, pregnancies resulting from abuse may lead to unsafe abortions, forced continuation of pregnancy or early marriage, each of which carries severe physical and mental health risks. Physical manifestations of trauma, including weight loss because of changes in eating behaviours, becoming agitated and fainting were also observed by professionals. Physical consequences of sexual abuse are often compounded in Pakistan

42 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1860). [Penal Code](#), Art 377.

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by delayed medical care due to fear of disclosure, stigma or lack of access to child-friendly health services. Professionals describe instances where survivors are brought late to healthcare facilities, if at all, limiting opportunities for forensic evidence collection, timely treatment and psychosocial referral. 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.

Household-level economic strain and barriers to justice

The impact of exploitation and abuse frequently extends into the economic and institutional domains. For those whose livelihoods depend on social interaction, this withdrawal can have devastating economic effects. For example:

“

If the father is a shopkeeper, he no longer wants to go to his shop. Because of this, their economic conditions also start deteriorating. Someone running a business, out of fear that 'If our situation is exposed, we will be insulted,' withdraws. (FW)

”

Forced migration, undertaken to escape stigma, often results in the loss of social networks, economic hardship and prolonged psychological distress for both parents and children. For families who are forced to relocate, this may have serious financial repercussions:

“

Migration means selling property at undervalued prices, abandoning jobs or businesses they worked for years to establish, and leaving behind relatives and social circles. (JP)

”

The financial strain of isolation or relocation is often compounded by the costs associated with navigating legal proceedings. The costs of engaging a lawyer, as well as covering the costs of

transportation to and from court, may lead some families to withdraw from the process or miss court hearings. The compound stresses identified here underline the need for family-centred psychosocial interventions that account for the economic impacts of exploitation and abuse on families.

Perpetrators often exploit these vulnerabilities, using financial pressure, community influence or informal settlements to evade accountability. Families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are therefore not only more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse but also face greater barriers to justice and recovery.

In light of this, the data indicate that perpetrators may deliberately target children from low-income families, knowing that financial vulnerability can limit the family's ability to seek justice and manage the repercussions if the exploitation and abuse become known. In one case, a perpetrator intimidated the family and exploited the family's economic hardship to pressure them into accepting a settlement. Another professional described witnessing this dynamic in court, where the child's family stood alone, while the perpetrator appeared with a large group of supporters:

“

...His clan, influential community members and local leaders, all rallying to protect him. (FW)

”

This shows how economic vulnerability and social hierarchy can intersect, allowing perpetrators to leverage financial hardship and community influence to evade accountability. The imbalance of power not only increases the likelihood of children from low-income families being targeted for exploitation and abuse but also exposes them and their families to intimidation and social isolation. As this case illustrates, it can even undermine their access to justice.

Economic vulnerability plays a critical role in shaping families' responses to exploitation and abuse in Pakistan. For households reliant on daily wages, small businesses or community-based livelihoods, social withdrawal can have immediate financial consequences.

3. ACCESS TO CARE



3. ACCESS TO CARE

Justice professionals and front-line workers reflected on the factors that may influence the use of care services for children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in the relevant provinces. It is important to note that case management and service provision system vary markedly across provinces in Pakistan. While the factors identified in this chapter are not intended to be exhaustive, they point to important strengths and challenges in service provision in the country. Data from the legal and policy analysis present the procedures and safeguards available for children as they access services, while interviews with professionals and young people offer important perspectives on the provision and effectiveness of these services, promising practices and the challenges faced.

Procedural and institutional framework

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023, broadly provides that the government shall establish a mechanism to support victims of offences under the Act, in collaboration with relevant agencies and civil society organizations.⁴³ However, federal law does not clearly establish an enforceable entitlement to recovery and rehabilitation for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, and there is limited evidence of dedicated support programmes designed to address their specific needs.

The Government operates currently a total of 10 Anti-Rape Crisis Cells within public hospitals in Bahawalpur, Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Karachi and Peshawar.⁴⁴ These provide integrated services, including medical

treatment, psychosocial counselling, legal guidance and forensic support.⁴⁵ Their mandate extends to assisting children subjected to sexual violence, including crimes of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse covered by existing legislation.⁴⁶

Relevant child protection frameworks and mechanisms for the provision of rehabilitation and recovery services are also found at the provincial and territorial levels. An illustrative example is the Islamabad Capital Territory Child Protection Act, which provides for the development of individualized care plans for children in need of protection and support, including those who were subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, in accordance with the principle of the best interests of the child.⁴⁷ Similar frameworks include the Balochistan Child Protection Act,⁴⁸ which provides services for the prevention, protection, rehabilitation and integration of children at risk or survivors of exploitation and abuse, violence, exploitation, neglect and child trafficking. It also establishes mechanisms such as child protection units, a referral system, transit shelters, and psychosocial, legal and medical support services for affected children. The Sindh Child Protection Authority Act,⁴⁹ the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act,⁵⁰ the Gilgit-Baltistan Child Protection Response Act⁵¹ and the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act,⁵² though limited in scope, also provide for protective measures.

As of May 2026, Pakistan had a total of 46 District Child Protection Units nationwide,⁵³ with more planned to be opened. Managed by provincial authorities, they serve as hubs for the reception, registration, assessment, case planning and

43 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 45(A).

44 UNICEF Pakistan (May 2026). Personal communication.

45 UN Women (2025). [How Pakistan's Anti-Rape Crisis Cells are transforming support for survivors](#).

46 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2021). [Anti-Rape \(Investigation and Trial\) Act](#), Schedule I.

47 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2018). [Islamabad Capital Territory Child Protection Act](#), Sections 2(I), 3, 5(a), 14.

48 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Balochistan Child Protection Act](#).

49 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2011). [Sindh Child Protection Authority Act](#).

50 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2010). [Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Child Protection and Welfare Act](#).

51 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2017). [Gilgit-Baltistan Child Protection Response Act](#).

52 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2004). [Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act](#).

53 District Child Protection Units nationwide at time of publication: Balochistan (11) Quetta, Pishin, Lasbela, Killa Saifullah, Chaman, Chagi, Naseerabad, Jaffarabad, Jhak Magsi, Sohbat pur, Hub; Sindh (3) Karachi East, Hyderabad, Sukkur; KP (21) Abbottabad, Bannu, Batagram, Buner, Charsada, Chitral, Dir Lower, Kohat, Mardan, Peshawar, Swabi, Swat, Kurram, Khyber, Bajour, North Waziristan, Orakzai, Mohmand, South Waziristan, Kohat, Lakki; Punjab (7) Hafizabad, Sargodha, Attock, Toba Tek Singh, DG Khan, Muzaffargarh, Rajanpur; ICT (1) Islamabad; GB (1) Gilgit; AJK (2) Muzaffarabad, Rawalakot.

referral of cases involving child violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and harmful practices. They also provide direct services, including psychosocial support and temporary shelter.⁵⁴ However, the District Child Protection Units appear to be heavily concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, and even in these provinces full district coverage has not been achieved. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has 21 units across 37 districts, with public funds for five additional units announced in February 2026.⁵⁵ In the absence of full provincial/territorial coverage, access to support services for children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse may vary considerably across districts and provinces. Beyond expanding the number of District Child Protection Units, strengthened coordination among service providers and enhanced quality of services are also necessary to ensure consistent protection outcomes.⁵⁶

Restoring voice and control in the context of fear

Silence can function as a form of self-protection when children and their families fear pervasive stigma. Practitioners repeatedly described careful, relational work to address children's fear and hesitation within clinical and justice settings. One front-line worker explained, *"The girl was hesitant to give full information... gradually, after holding some sessions, I was able to win her trust"*. A justice professional similarly noted:

“

Girls rarely share the full story or all the evidence. They often tell only part of it. (JP)

”

Partial disclosure was not viewed as dishonestly, but as a cautious response shaped by fear and uncertainty. Children's fear was frequently rooted in anticipated family consequences. As one front-line worker recalled, a girl expressed:

“

They are very ghairat mand (honour- bound) people, they will kill me. (FW)

”

This statement reflects how concerns about honour and family reaction influence decisions about disclosure. In such circumstances, children's hesitation is shaped not only by trauma but by credible concerns about further harm within their own social environment.

Practitioners responded by creating small but meaningful opportunities for children to feel safe and heard. Offering choices about meeting spaces – *"Where would you like to meet? McDonald's?"* (JP) – helped reduce the formality and pressure of institutional settings. Sensitivity to gender dynamics was also framed as essential:

“

She was not comfortable speaking in our presence and wanted to talk only with the female psychologist... We respected this demand. (FW)

”

Respecting such preferences helped reduce anxiety and supported more open communication. These examples illustrate that in this context, child-centred care is closely tied to restoring a sense of dignity, predictability and choice within otherwise intimidating systems. Psychological safety is achieved not only through clinical techniques but through redistributing power – allowing children to determine whom they speak to, where they speak and how disclosure unfolds as part of help-seeking. Policies that overlook these sociocultural dynamics risk misinterpreting silence as non-cooperation in support settings rather than as cautious self-protection.

54 UNICEF Pakistan (March 2024). Personal communication.

55 LEAD Pakistan (2026). [CM KP approves establishment of new child protection units in five districts](#). UNICEF Pakistan (May 2026). Personal communication.

56 UNICEF Pakistan (March 2024). Personal communication.

3. ACCESS TO CARE

Psychological safety during the justice process

Access to justice and care are not only procedural but relational. Children cannot meaningfully exercise their rights to participation, protection or remedy unless psychological safety is first established.

Across cases, practitioners described emotional stabilization not as a component of care, but as the condition that makes subsequent justice processes viable. Emotional stabilization is sometimes framed as necessary to enable testimony rather than as a right to recovery. Practitioners frequently encountered acute distress on first contact with the child — “*She was in extreme fear*” (FW) — and, in some cases, suicidal ideation:

“

She was saying things like, ‘I’ll die...’ So the very first thing I did was calm her down. (FW)

”

Without psychological support, investigative processes often stalled. As one justice professional noted:

“

Multiple counselling sessions were needed before she could give a clear account. (JP)

”

The ability to narrate harm – central to evidentiary processes – was contingent on the emotional regulation of the child.

While some practitioners may try to use child-centred approaches, in practice child well-being risks being positioned as a means to facilitate legal procedures. From a child-rights perspective, this raises a critical policy question: is psychological care valued as an intrinsic entitlement, or primarily as a mechanism to secure legal outcomes? As one front-line worker explained, investigative priorities were paused until the child felt stable:

“

Our first step was to begin her counselling and help her return to a normal life before asking her any investigative questions. (FW)

”

Special police personnel sought to counter self-blame and fear by reframing the institutional environment. As one officer told a child:

“

This police station is for you... Nothing wrong has happened because of you. (JP)

”

Such statements functioned not merely as reassurance, but as attempts to reassign moral responsibility away from the child. However, these accounts also reveal that while individual practitioners may offer some support to children, it is unclear if systematic child-centred processes are embedded across the system to enable psychosocial safety for children during formal justice processes.

Family attitudes determine whether engagement with child protection practitioners is possible

Caregivers emerged as both gatekeepers and potential sources of protection. Initial family reactions sometimes limited access to services and recovery pathways. In some cases, “*The family refused to take the girl back [home]*” after they became aware of her abuse (FW), reflecting how stigma can override protective instincts. Fear of community judgment was explicit: “*If we bring this girl back... we will have to face people’s taunts*” (FW). These responses show how 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. It also reflects the lack of citizen trust in the system and communities to accept them and their child after they are subjected to exploitation and abuse.

Blame often circulated within households. One practitioner observed, *“The father usually says... this is all the mother’s fault”* (JP), illustrating how responsibility may be redirected internally, and is often gendered, rather than towards the perpetrator. In more restrictive responses, *“Girls are confined at home. Their phones are taken away... treated almost like prisoners”* (JP), effectively placing additional limitations on the child after the abuse.

At the same time, practitioners emphasized that families could become strong allies when appropriately engaged. Counselling efforts often focused on reframing parental responsibility in protective terms: *“She is your daughter... you must stand by her”* (FW). Another practitioner reflected, *“The child’s first support system is the parents... If the parents are not supporting the child, then how can you or I do it?”* (FW).

These accounts underscore the fact that 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. Interventions that do not address family-level dynamics risk limiting the impact of broader institutional reforms.

Civil society organizations act as a bridge to services in a structurally fragile system

At the community level, civil society organizations and interdisciplinary teams frequently compensate for gaps within state systems. Practitioners described connecting families with support across districts: *“We connect families with referral to psychologists across almost every district”* (FW). Complex cases required collective coordination: *“It required the whole team... The psychologist played a very significant role”* (FW), reinforcing the idea that *“This is teamwork– the whole team has to move together”* (JP). These accounts illustrate how child protection responses often rely on relational networks rather than formally embedded service pathways.

Importantly, the engagement of civil society organizations extended beyond the closure of the legal proceedings: *“Our work does not end just by securing justice... we continue to provide it”* (FW). This emphasis on sustained rehabilitation aligns closely with child-rights principles of recovery and reintegration, recognizing that justice processes alone do not restore safety, well-being or dignity.

However, reliance on networks of civil society organizations raises structural concerns. Where trauma-informed care depends on relational goodwill and external organizations, access becomes uneven and sustainability uncertain. Strengthening the integration of services led by civil society organizations alongside state entities, including through standardized, trauma-informed practices, formalized referral pathways and sustainable state funding for specialized NGO service provision, is critical in this resource-constrained context.

This structural fragility becomes especially significant in the context of calls for expanded policing, surveillance and investigative responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. While strengthening detection and enforcement mechanisms is often framed as progress, increasing identification without parallel investment in trauma-informed protection systems risks generating unintended harms.

When children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse are identified through digital monitoring, platform reporting or law enforcement operations but encounter stigma, family retaliation, secondary victimization during investigation or limited access to psychosocial care, the protective intent of the intervention can be undermined. In such contexts, detection can often precede protection. Without coordinated referral pathways, trained personnel and sustained rehabilitation services, children may be exposed to repeated questioning, prolonged legal processes or community backlash without adequate support.

Strengthening community-based services, formalizing referral mechanisms and embedding trauma-informed standards across the entire system must therefore accompany any expansion of investigative capacity. Identification alone does not constitute protection.

3. ACCESS TO CARE

Well-being of professionals responding to technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse

Emotional toll on professionals: vicarious trauma and distress

Professionals responding to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan experience significant psychological strain. Exposure to children's trauma, parental distress, threats of further violence and graphic abuse materials contribute to emotional exhaustion and distress. One justice professional described the experience as:

“

A deeply traumatizing experience... there were nights we couldn't even sleep. The mental stress was overwhelming. (JP)

”

The emotional proximity of cases, particularly when professionals themselves have children or siblings– intensified the impact. A front-line worker described spending “the whole day listening to a child crying” and receiving messages from a girl threatening suicide, adding:

“

So of course I get pressurized... if I cannot save her, then what will I do? So, my mental health gets disturbed, very much disturbed in these kinds of cases... even though we are front-line workers, we are still human beings. (FW)

”

These accounts highlight the moral and emotional burden professionals carry, especially in situations involving honour-based violence or suicide.

The graphic and disturbing nature of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse cases –particularly exposure to sexual abuse materials – was repeatedly described as difficult to manage. One professional reflected:

“

Even for me personally, it was very hard to digest such cases... I was in a restless condition for several days. Eventually, I consulted our stress counsellor. (FW)

”

While this individual accessed counselling, they acknowledged that “these cases are never ‘normal’ for us.” Another justice professional stated, “This case was so disturbing that I personally felt abnormal for two days afterwards.”

Notably, only one respondent mentioned formal stress counselling, suggesting that structured mental health support is not systematized. This indicates an institutional gap between the intensity of the work and the support mechanisms available for front-line workers to sustain it. Sustaining effective child protection requires ensuring that professionals themselves have access to support and supervision. Without adequate psychosocial safeguards, burn-out and distress may undermine long-term capacity.

Gendered risks and structural stigma

Female professionals described additional risks and social stigma. One front-line worker reflected:

“

Personally, being a female... when you have to go to a police station at midnight... being female, I feel there are these kinds of issues. (FW)

”

This highlights how gender norms intersect with occupational risk. Concerns about safety, reputation and mobility can compound the pressures faced by women working in child protection and justice roles.

These experiences demonstrate that responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are shaped by wider social dynamics. Strengthening protection systems therefore requires attention not only to procedures and laws, but also to the working conditions and social environments in which professionals operate.



Spotlight: Security risks and obstruction of justice

As well as psychological strain, professionals face direct threats and violence. Law enforcement described community resistance during investigations while other professionals emphasized vulnerability:

“

When we go for raids, sometimes the neighbours gather and attack us to protect the accused... We've faced these many times. The challenges are huge. (FW)

”

“

Our staff are very vulnerable... many people approach our staff and threaten them to back off... our staff is not provided with any kind of security. (FW)

”

Such threats not only affect professionals' mental well-being but also impede the integrity of investigations, as noted by a professional supporting a child to report exploitation and abuse:

“

Our organization directly received threats— 'Why are you getting involved? This is a local family issue'... we had to face multiple layers of threats... if I... am not secure... how can I promise the victim justice? (FW)

”

These accounts illustrate how cases operate within broader power structures, including community pressure and resistance to external intervention. Ensuring the safety of professionals is therefore closely linked to maintaining accountability processes.

4. DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING



4. DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING

Disrupting Harm defines disclosure as a child conveying or attempting to convey that they are being or have been sexually exploited or abused. Disclosure can take many forms: some children may speak explicitly about what happened, while others may express themselves indirectly through changes in behaviours, body language or other non-verbal cues. Disclosure is not always deliberate; it can be accidental, partial or unclear, and is rarely a one-time event. More often, it unfolds gradually as part of an ongoing process, shaped by the child's evolving sense of safety, trust and readiness. Reporting abuse involves alerting formal authorities that abuse has taken place: this may include police, child protection or statutory authorities.

The section highlights factors that can enable disclosure and reporting and create safer conditions for children to seek help, such as supportive families. Due to small sample sizes, the survey findings may not be indicative of children's pathways to disclosure and reporting but provides a starting point, particularly when they are understood in the context of qualitative findings.

Whom do children disclose to?

Of the 77 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse among children aged 12–17 in Pakistan in the year prior to being surveyed, 57 per cent were not disclosed to anyone (N=45). In other words, in over half of instances, children did not tell a parent, friend, teacher or any other trusted person about the exploitation or abuse. The people children might be expected to seek help from often remain unaware of the abuse. Survey data show that when disclosing exploitation and abuse, they were most likely to tell their friends (N=11). This was followed by disclosure to a brother or sister (N=6). This finding highlights the important role that peers can play as trusted confidants and sources of support. While children should never be expected to bear responsibility for preventing or responding to exploitation and abuse, the results suggest value in ensuring that children know how to respond when a friend seeks help and where to turn for support from trusted adults and services. Effective safeguarding systems should recognize children as important interlocutors in disclosure pathways, while ensuring responsibility for protection remains firmly with adults and institutions.

What prevents children from speaking up or enables them to disclose?

Seeking help or formally reporting exploitation and abuse is often a highly distressing process for children, marked by fear, uncertainty and shame. This section outlines the key barriers identified in the quantitative and qualitative data that prevent children and their families in Pakistan from disclosing and reporting tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.

Community stigma and victim-blaming create fear that silences children and their families

Survey findings reinforce how strongly shame and uncertainty shape children's willingness to disclose exploitation and abuse. Among the 77 instances of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse, 29 per cent were not disclosed because the child reported feeling embarrassed, while 30 per cent were not disclosed because the child said they did not know where to go for help or whom to tell. These barriers directly reflect the social realities described in interviews, where silence is often driven not only by fear of perpetrators but by fear of community judgment.

Severe and pervasive community stigma – closely linked to notions of stigma and shame – emerged as a primary barrier preventing children and their families from reporting tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. Families frequently fear that reporting will lead to the exploitation and abuse becoming known within their community, resulting in dishonour for both the child and the wider family. In some cases, families reported being forced to relocate entirely when the abuse became known.

“

These incidents are common but underreported. They're not reported because families feel it will bring shame. Sometimes cases are reported and later withdrawn under pressure or due to settlements. Threats are often involved, and we are unable to pursue these cases further. (FW)

”

In Pakistan, honour-based stigma operates not only at the community level but within institutions themselves. Professionals noted that police officers,

4. DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING

health workers and even legal practitioners may unconsciously reproduce moral judgments shaped by prevailing social norms, reinforcing children's fears that disclosure will lead to blame rather than protection.

Professionals consistently described stigma as a key driver of widespread underreporting of all forms of sexual abuse in Pakistan. They explained that accessing the formal justice system can itself expose children and families to further harm, as legal proceedings often make exploitation and abuse visible within the community. Families are therefore placed in the difficult position of weighing the potential benefits of justice against the long-term social consequences their child may face in a context where sexual abuse is perceived to damage family honour. These dynamics are particularly acute in rural areas and smaller towns, where social networks are tightly knit and anonymity is limited. In such settings, the risk of exposure is immediate, and families may perceive reporting as a greater risk to their reputation, rather than a pathway to justice.

“

Reporting requires a lot of courage. People don't trust the system enough; they fear harassment at police stations and long court processes. Families worry that if it's a daughter, her future will be ruined; if it's a son, his future too will be damaged. (JP)

”

According to professionals, these fears are not unfounded. Children are often blamed for the exploitation and abuse they were subjected to and are described as being “deeply afraid” of disclosure to parents or community members. This stigma not only silences children but can also be actively exploited by perpetrators. Knowing that children fear disclosure, perpetrators may use threats of exposure, blackmail or shame to escalate abuse. Delays in speaking to a trusted adult therefore create opportunities for perpetrators to deepen and prolong harm.

A recurring theme across interviews was the strategic use of fear of parental reaction and social consequences. Perpetrators often relied on children's anticipation of punishment, stigma

or shame to prevent disclosure and ensure compliance. A prosecutor described a case in which a domestic employee coerced a child into producing sexual content by threatening to tell her mother she had disobeyed:

“

If you don't do what I say, I will tell your mother that you disobey me. Your mother trusts me more than she trusts you. (JP)

”

The maid continued this abuse multiple times and recorded videos, blackmailing the girl by claiming she had already uploaded them to TikTok. Another household employee was also involved in the abuse and the content was reported being sold online:

“

When the second maid came, she began torturing the child as well, saying she was in contact with the first maid through WhatsApp messages, voice notes and videos. She forced the child to listen to these messages and threatened her: 'You must do the same acts with me that you did with the previous maid, otherwise I will tell your mother.' (JP)

”

One front-line worker described a case in which a young girl was initially groomed and exploited online by her cousin, who later used threats of exposure to coerce her into ongoing abuse. With no safe adult to turn to, the abuse escalated and eventually involved multiple perpetrators:

“

He pretended to care for her, then blackmailed her using her videos. She became terrified and didn't know whom to ask for help. He later brought in other cousins and friends, and they collectively gang-raped her. (FW)

”

This case illustrates how earlier intervention by trusted adults could have prevented further harm. However, such intervention depends on children feeling safe enough to disclose abuse— something that stigma and fear often prevent.

Family support as a critical enabler of disclosure and reporting

When children do disclose exploitation and abuse, the response of caregivers is critical in determining whether they receive support and whether a report is made. However, professionals noted that family support is often fragile and requires significant encouragement and guidance. Professionals strongly indicated that children and young people often seek help with the support of a sibling to avoid their parents knowing about the abuse:

“

These complaints are usually that either a friend or a sister is telling me, ‘There’s a minor girl I know who is going through this, madam please guide us how to pursue this, we don’t want to involve the parents’. (JP)

”

Supportive families can help children navigate reporting processes and withstand community pressure. Because of this pressure, many children and their families only seek help when they reach a point of acute distress and are no longer able to manage the situation alone:

“

Families usually approach us overwhelmed – mentally, physically and socially. If they could handle it themselves, they wouldn’t come to us. They come when the pressure becomes unbearable. (JP)

”

In one instance recalled by a professional, the existence of child sexual abuse material influenced a decision to seek help. A 17-year-old boy who was sexually assaulted by a group of men disclosed the abuse to his parents because he feared the

video of the abuse would be shared. At this point, the parents’ children sought support from the authorities. In such cases, disclosure may occur not through safety or trust, but under the threat of further harm:

“

But when the child reached his house — as I mentioned earlier about how online violence often translates into physical violence — there, four adult men raped him. The child tried to escape, but unfortunately, that did not happen and he was roughly raped. Along with this, those men also recorded videos of him. (JP)

”

In patriarchal family structures in Pakistan, the position of the primary decision maker – often the father or eldest male relative – can significantly influence whether a case proceeds. Mothers may support disclosure but can lack authority to act without broader family consent, highlighting gendered power dynamics within households. In one case, a young girl was groomed through a gaming application and later subjected to extortion, sexual abuse and financial exploitation. Her father sought help only after the harassment became relentless:

“

As he recounted the abuse, tears streamed down his face. His emotional state was so severe it is difficult to describe. (JP)

”

Despite his willingness to seek legal advice, the father was initially reluctant to pursue formal reporting due to fear of family and community repercussions. With sustained support from a lawyer, he ultimately supported his daughter to report the crime. Professionals emphasized that convincing parents to report exploitation and abuse is often one of the most challenging steps in responding to cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse:

4. DISCLOSURE AND REPORTING

“

Convincing the parents that reporting was necessary to stop the abuse and prevent future incidents was a major challenge. It took time, but eventually they agreed. (FW)

”

Decisions to report are frequently made in the context of extreme emotional strain. In one case, a front-line worker supported a family whose father died by suicide during the court process, following a mental health crisis triggered by the exploitation and abuse of his son. Despite this loss, the mother remained committed to pursuing justice:

“

She said, ‘My child has been wronged, and no other child should suffer like this.’ Her faith in the process helped us act quickly – and justice was delivered. (FW)

”

Professionals emphasized that sustained support – legal, practical, psychosocial and emotional – is essential for families to withstand prolonged pressure. Without such support, even initially motivated families may disengage, underscoring the need for structured, family-centred interventions.

The findings in this section demonstrate that community stigma and victim-blaming are central drivers of silence around tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan. Fear of dishonour, social exclusion and long-term consequences for children’s futures discourage disclosure and delay reporting, often allowing exploitation and abuse to escalate. While family support can play a decisive role

in enabling disclosure and access to justice, families themselves require sustained guidance, reassurance and protection to overcome stigma and fear. Addressing these barriers will require interventions that extend beyond legal reform to include community-level norm change, trusted reporting pathways and survivor-centred support for children and their families.

Formal reporting

Formal reporting mechanisms

All offences against children under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act are legally classified as “cognizable,”⁵⁷ meaning that the competent investigation agency may register a case, prepare a first information report, initiate investigations and arrest suspects without prior approval from a magistrate.⁵⁸

As with any other cognizable offence, offences under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act may also be reported to regular police units. Reports may be made orally or in writing by any informant and give rise to the registration of a first information report.⁵⁹ This report must then be transmitted to the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, as regular police units do not have the authority to investigate cybercrime on their own.⁶⁰ Cases can also be brought directly to magistrates.⁶¹

Alternatively, tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be reported through the Child Protection Helpline (1121) or to a District Child Protection Unit, allowing cases to be registered in the national child protection case management and referral system. In addition, the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency operates a dedicated 24/7 helpline (1799) and an online reporting portal.⁶²

Despite the existence of these mechanisms, none (n=0) of the children surveyed reported to formal avenues, including helplines, social workers and

57 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 43(2).

58 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1898). [Code of Criminal Procedure](#), sections 4(f), 156(f), 190.

59 Ibid., section 154.

60 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2025). [Act No. II of 2025 further to amend the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016](#), section 7.

61 Islamic Republic of Pakistan. (1898). [Code of Criminal Procedure](#). Section 190.

62 National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency [Complaint Registration Form](#), accessed on 4 March 2026.

police. According to one justice professional, even being seen entering a police station can be interpreted as a source of dishonour, further discouraging families from formally reporting. One female lawyer described how deeply embedded the fear of this stigma is, even among her own family:

“

Going to a police station itself is a problem. Even in very educated families, girls feel that just the thought of going there brings dishonour to the family. (JP)

”



Spotlight: Law enforcement structures

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Investigation Rules used to grant the Federal Investigation Agency, through its Cybercrime Wing, authority to investigate tech-facilitated offences.⁶³ The Rules further required the Cybercrime Wing to establish help desks at the country's 15 Cybercrime Reporting Centres to receive complaints and mandated the installation of a complaint management and tracking system to facilitate expedited processing.⁶⁴ In January 2025, the Parliament formally disbanded the Cybercrime Wing and transferred its personnel, budget, assets and responsibilities to the newly created National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, which took over the cybercrime investigation functions previously carried out by the Federal Investigation Agency.⁶⁵

A lack of trust in police deters children and their families from making a formal report

Across interviews, front-line workers and justice professionals consistently identified a lack of trust in police as a major deterrent to reporting tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Investigation Rules used to mandate the Director General of the Federal Investigation Agency to ensure fair representation of women within the Cybercrime Wing, including the requirements that at least 25 per cent of investigation and help desk officers at Cybercrime Reporting Centres were women.⁶⁶ While it is unclear whether comparable gender-representation requirements have been established under the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, such safeguards are not systematically in place in regular police stations, which are widely perceived as male-dominated, punitive spaces that are ill equipped to handle child sexual abuse sensitively. For children, especially girls, the prospect of entering such spaces can itself be traumatizing.

“

There is no culture where people can easily go to a police station and register a case. Even the thought of going there creates fear. (JP)

”

Pakistan is working to address these issues by establishing a specialized Unit to Counter Online Child Abuse (UCOCA). According to publicly available information, officers in the unit are trained on trauma-informed and gender-sensitive investigations.⁶⁷ Despite the establishment of the unit, interviews with professionals demonstrate that mistrust continues to be driven by several interrelated factors, including concerns about confidentiality, victim-blaming attitudes, fear of harassment and perceived corruption or inaction by police. These concerns intersect strongly with community stigma, as explained below.

63 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2018). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Investigation Rules](#), section 3(1).

64 Ibid., sections 2(i), 6(1), 6(2); page 63 (Schedule III).

65 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2025). [Act No. II of 2025 further to amend the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016](#), section 6.

66 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2018). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Investigation Rules](#), section 4(13).

67 National Commission on the Rights of the Child (2024). [Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan](#).

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Victim-blaming and insensitive treatment by police

Professionals reported that when children and families do attempt to report exploitation and abuse, they may encounter victim-blaming attitudes and insensitive questioning by police and other officials. Such interactions can reinforce shame and cause families to abandon reporting altogether. Several professionals described children leaving police stations determined never to return due to the treatment they received.

“

Officials use crude and offensive language, saying things like, ‘She must have been involved with someone.’ This behaviour is unacceptable and must be met with accountability. (JP)

”

These interactions may reflect broader societal attitudes rather than isolated misconduct. Professionals noted that without mandatory training in child rights and trauma-informed practice, victim-blaming responses are likely to persist. In some cases, children who had previously sought help through helplines were discouraged from further reporting after being required to attend police stations in person:

“

They told her she had to come physically. She refused, because of how she had been treated the last time she went. After that experience, she swore never to go back. (FW)

”

Professionals also noted that these experiences can be gendered, with girls particularly vulnerable to moral judgment and assumptions of complicity.

Structural and procedural barriers to registering complaints and professional misconduct

As well as attitudes, professionals reported structural and procedural barriers to formally registering complaints. Police were described as reluctant to register the first information reports, leading to delays that compromise investigations and result in the loss of critical evidence.

“

The first major issue is that the police do not take such cases seriously... Their first instinct is to avoid registering a first information report. Valuable time is wasted, and critical medico-legal evidence is lost. (JP)

”

In one case, a 16-17-year-old girl was kidnapped while attending a religious practice with her sister. A religious leader and a group of his friends sexually abused the girl over several weeks, recording the abuse on video. Her siblings were turned away by police when they desperately sought help to retrieve her. According to the front-line worker, the police and the perpetrators were connected socially.

Delays in the registration of first information reports are particularly damaging in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, where digital evidence can be altered, deleted or lost. Professionals in Pakistan suggest that accountability mechanisms for non-registration (for example, being liable for dereliction of statutory duty) are not well implemented. This further discourages families from insisting on their rights when they are unaware or have few resources to hold authorities accountable. As a result, lawyers are often forced to intervene directly or seek court orders simply to initiate the reporting process – an approach that is costly, slow and inaccessible for many families.

More troublingly, some professionals described cases in which police officers themselves were implicated in exploitation and abuse or used their influence to protect perpetrators within their personal or professional networks. These incidents severely undermine public trust and reinforce perceptions that reporting will not result in justice.

“

The family knew the complaint would never be registered otherwise. Even then, the police officer involved was never apprehended. (JP)

”

In another case, police inaction reportedly allowed a child's abuse to continue for several days, despite family members seeking help during the incident itself:

“

Some of the perpetrators were politically influential or connected to police. No action was taken and the child was repeatedly assaulted. (JP)

”

5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES



5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

This chapter examines the response by the justice system to cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, with a particular focus on the barriers and enablers affecting children's and families' access to the formal justice system in Pakistan. It further focuses on how the institutions and professionals involved address children's needs, protect them from further harm and uphold their rights, particularly through the use of child-centred procedures. It also assesses the extent to which the legal framework provides for such procedures.

Interviews with front-line workers, law enforcement officials and justice professionals revealed consistent and interrelated challenges faced by children and their families when seeking formal justice. These include prolonged delays, financial barriers and the lack of child-centred safeguards, including exposure to insensitive and repeated questioning. Such factors may intensify children's fear and anxiety and contribute to secondary victimization. These challenges are further compounded by community attitudes that generate shame and stigma, often leading families to withdraw complaints before cases reach their conclusion. For many families, the negative impacts of engaging with the justice system can outweigh its benefits, underscoring the need for systemic reforms that prioritize protection, confidentiality and trauma-informed practices.

The justice system response is slow, costly and frequently revictimizing

Lengthy investigations and proceedings

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act includes dedicated provisions to expedite proceedings for the offences it regulates, requiring investigating officers to complete investigations within 45 days.⁶⁸ In addition, courts are required to decide cases within three months; where this time frame is not met, the matter must be brought to the attention of the Chief Justice of the High Court concerned.⁶⁹ However, interviewees' accounts indicate that these statutory timelines are not always respected in practice, raising concerns as to the effectiveness of these safeguards in ensuring timely access to justice and legal remedies for children subjected to tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse. Professionals

consistently described justice procedures as slow, complex and burdensome, often exacerbating the harm experienced by children.

Delays were reported to arise from the earliest procedural stages, including during the investigation phase, with some cases failing to progress to court altogether. In certain instances, interviewees pointed to institutional failures, including allegations of police corruption, as contributing factors. For example, one justice professional described a case of sexual extortion in which, despite the existence of video evidence and allegations of repeated coercion, the perpetrator allegedly colluded with the police to prevent the proceedings from advancing, ultimately leading the child's family to withdraw from the process:

“

There were videos recorded we also alleged that the accused was blackmailing and coercing the girl multiple times into sexual activities. So, all these things were there. But what the perpetrator did was, they manipulated the process in collusion with the police. (JP)

”

According to interviewees, delays in the Pakistani justice system are further driven by structural constraints, including understaffed courts, frequent adjournments and broader procedural inefficiencies, which they indicated disproportionately affect children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse. While the reasons for this disproportionate impact remain unclear, they may relate to the lack of specialized child courts, limited law enforcement and judicial capacity to deal with cases involving children⁷⁰ and the inherent complexity of such offences, including challenges related to evidence collection. However, professionals highlighted significant regional variations: while courts in Islamabad demonstrate greater familiarity with digital evidence and relevant international frameworks, courts in other regions may lack the training and resources required to handle such cases effectively.

68 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 30(3).

69 Ibid., section 30(4).

70 UNICEF Pakistan (April 2026). Personal communication.

5. ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND LEGAL REMEDIES

In practice, according to a number of justice professionals, court processes frequently extend over several years, requiring children and families to attend repeated hearings. This may contribute to families deciding not to pursue the case further, as one front-line worker interviewed noted: “Cases keep getting delayed hearing after hearing. Eventually, families become exhausted and drop the case” As well as prolonging proceedings, such delays place significant emotional and financial strain on families, shifting their priorities from seeking justice to protecting the child from further harm. In contexts where repeated engagement risks exacerbating stigma and social pressure, withdrawal may become the only viable option. As one interviewee explained:

“

The girl and her family were not ready to go through (the court process) again. They had already made a lot of effort, faced many threats and suffered a lot. They could not pursue it any further. (JP)

”

Financial barriers to accessing justice

Among the professionals interviewed, justice processes in Pakistan were widely perceived as opaque and difficult to navigate without legal representation, which is often required from the outset simply to initiate proceedings. Some interviewees noted that the public prosecution system is overburdened and marked by inconsistent outcomes, leading many families to rely on private lawyers to pursue reporting and advance cases related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Reporting without legal representation was described as nearly impossible, as it would likely result in children and families being turned away, dismissed or exposed to further harm when attempting to engage with the system. This situation effectively privatizes access to justice, making it contingent on financial means. As one justice professional interviewed noted: “If you cannot afford a good lawyer, how will

you get justice?” (JP). While hiring private lawyers can help overcome existing barriers to reporting, including police resistance, this workaround is costly and often beyond the reach of families with limited financial means: “Many families cannot afford legal fees, which is why they fall through the cracks of the legal system” (JP). The professionals interviewed emphasized that this dependence on private representation is neither equitable nor sustainable and reflects deeper systemic failures.

Indeed, the Juvenile Justice System Act guarantees child victims of crime the right to legal assistance at the expense of the State,⁷¹ to be provided by a lawyer with at least seven years’ standing at the bar.⁷² Access is contingent upon an application to, and subsequent eligibility assessment by, the Legal Aid and Justice Authority or one of its offices, which are to give preference to disadvantaged children when extending legal assistance, particularly in matters involving sexual offences.⁷³

However, as reflected in the accounts above, access to legal representation in practice appears closely tied to a family’s ability to secure private counsel, raising concerns as to whether this mechanism is actually reaching those unable to afford it. In this regard, several interviewees highlighted the need for alternative reporting pathways that could facilitate access to public defenders: “A neutral focal person, separate from police, could help families report cases and connect them with legal support” (JP).

As well as legal fees, families of children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse face additional financial burdens, including transportation costs, lost wages and repeated time away from work to attend justice proceedings. For daily-wage earners, these cumulative costs can make sustained participation impossible. In the words of one interviewee: “Families are stuck between managing daily wages and pursuing the case” (JP). Together, these systemic challenges create significant barriers to accessing formal justice for children and their families in Pakistan, reinforcing systemic inequities by excluding low-income families and potentially encouraging reliance on informal settlements.

⁷¹ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2018). [Juvenile Justice System Act](#), section 3(1).

⁷² Ibid., section 3(3).

⁷³ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2020). [Legal Aid and Justice Authority Act](#), sections 9(2), 9(4), 9(5).

Lack of child-centred safeguards

The Federal Government, in consultation with the Chief Justice of the respective High Court, is required to designate presiding officers to try offences under the *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act* and to provide them with specialized training in computer sciences, cyber forensics, electronic transactions and data protection.⁷⁴ However, there is no equivalent requirement for training in trauma-informed or child-centred approaches. This focus on technical expertise risks leaving presiding judges insufficiently prepared to engage with children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, increasing the likelihood that interactions may be handled insensitively or proceedings conducted without appropriate safeguards.

This challenge is compounded by the absence of a comprehensive and dedicated legal framework regulating how forensic interviews with child victims of crime should be conducted. Current rules do not require that they be systematically carried out by specially trained professionals, which increases the risk of inconsistent practices and secondary victimization arising from insensitive questioning. While certain safeguards are provided for by the Anti-Rape Act, including restrictions on repeated questioning, the mandatory recording of interviews and prohibitions on direct cross-examination of the child by the accused, these apply only in cases of rape, child sexual abuse material or sexual extortion, excluding other tech-facilitated offences, such as online grooming.⁷⁵

It is important to note, however, that the practice of recording forensic interviews provided has not yet been tested from a trauma-informed perspective for children and adolescents subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse that involved the use of digital technologies, who may have heightened sensitivity to being recorded or to the use of cameras by an adult. Although this may not be the case for any or all children, for some, the presence of a camera may trigger feelings of vulnerability, embarrassment or fear of further exposure. More research is needed to ensure that mandatory video recording aligns with trauma-

informed principles, balancing the need for reliable evidence with the psychological needs of survivors of these types of exploitation and abuse on a case-by-case basis.

Several professionals noted that the implementation of the safeguards outlined above is inconsistent and often dependent on individual discretion rather than systematic enforcement, resulting in an increased risk of revictimization for children during proceedings. In some instances, children are required to recount their abuse multiple times – to police, magistrates and courts. As one interviewed justice professional explained, “each repetition retraumatizes the child” (JP). Interviewees further highlighted the adversarial and hostile nature of these processes, which can be highly distressing for children and contribute to lasting feelings of guilt and shame:

“

Their sarcastic comments or dismissive behaviour made the process unnecessarily hostile. (JP)

”

“

When a child has to go through such an environment, it creates further mental stress. Then, during court proceedings, particularly during the recording of [their statement], the situation becomes even harder. In court, the accused and their defence counsel are present, and the child is cross-examined in front of everyone. Lawyers ask direct, sometimes harsh, questions. For a small child, it becomes unbearable– they start to feel as if they themselves are at fault, or that reporting the incident was a mistake. This instils a deep sense of guilt and shame. (JP)

”

⁷⁴ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023*, section 44.

⁷⁵ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2021). *Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act*, section 14; schedule I.

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While trials for offences under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act committed against children must be closed to the public,⁷⁶ interviewees indicated that children are often required to testify in overcrowded courtrooms, in the presence of the accused and members of the public. Such conditions undermine their sense of privacy, safety and emotional well-being, and are further compounded by the lack of designated child-friendly spaces within courts: *“The child entered the courtroom and became extremely anxious. There was no protected space.”* (JP)

Lastly, professionals highlighted that in some instances, digital evidence, particularly child sexual abuse material, is displayed repeatedly during proceedings, including in open court. For children and their families, this can amount to a continuation of the abuse, reinforcing feelings of shame and loss of control:

“

Earlier only the mother had seen the video. Now everyone sees it – the judge, lawyers, court staff. That repeated exposure deeply affects the child's mental health. (JP)

”

In response to these challenges, procedural guidance has been developed through judicial practice, with the Islamabad High Court issuing survivor-centred guidelines for cases involving child sexual abuse material in 2022. The guidelines provide that children should not be exposed to the accused or the court environment and that their testimony should be recorded through videoconferencing from a protective setting or given behind protective shields. Where the case is based on electronic evidence, the prosecution is not required to produce the child in court. The guidelines also mandate closed hearings and prohibit the display of child sexual abuse material during trial.⁷⁷ While these guidelines represent an important step towards child-centred proceedings in cases of tech-facilitated

sexual exploitation and abuse, the accounts above suggest that they are not systematically implemented in practice. Incorporating them into binding legislation and extending them to all provinces of the country and all forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse should therefore be considered to ensure they are applied consistently.

Social pressure leading to withdrawal from proceedings

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act requires the federal and provincial Governments to establish dedicated victim and witness protection systems for offences under the Act. It specifies that this system must provide a range of safeguards, including special security arrangements, concealment of identity, remote testimony through videoconferencing or audiovisual links, relocation, reasonable financial assistance, safe houses and other necessary protective measures.⁷⁸

Despite these mechanisms, families are often subjected to direct and indirect intimidation by perpetrators, their supporters or influential community members after cases are reported:

“

Even if the abuser is arrested and the case goes to court, our society puts a lot of pressure, and people usually stand with the abuser rather than the victim... (JP)

”

Compounding these issues, victim-blaming attitudes may result in the release of alleged perpetrators prior to trial, exposing children and their families to heightened risks of intimidation: *“If the girl herself shared pictures willingly, the High Court sometimes grants bail”* (JP). This suggests that such attitudes may not only shape social responses, but also influence judicial decision-making, with direct implications for children's safety once proceedings are initiated.

⁷⁶ Islamic Republic of Pakistan. (2016). [The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), Section 30C(1).

⁷⁷ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2022). [Criminal Appeal No.151/2020: Muhammad Shahzad Khaliq versus The State](#), paragraph 30.

⁷⁸ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 30B(1).

The professionals interviewed underlined that threats, coercion and social pressure to “forgive” or “reconcile” are common, and in some cases escalate into coordinated community intervention aimed at forcing families to abandon formal proceedings:

“
Because of this immense pressure from the community – some religious scholars got involved, some local groups got involved. [...] Everyone admitted that the incident had indeed happened, no one denied it. But they all agreed that going through courts and legal proceedings was not the solution. So they forced the party into compromise. Again, there were so many calls, so much outreach and then the social pressure – family members who did not even know, people started going to their homes... To avoid this social stigma, we had to end this case in a compromise. (JP)

These dynamics are further reinforced by deeply entrenched sociocultural norms around honour and shame, as well as the public nature of court proceedings, which expose families to community scrutiny and long-term social consequences, particularly in cases involving girls. Concerns around reputational harm, marriage prospects and family standing may lead parents to prioritize ending proceedings through informal settlements. In one instance, an interviewee deplored the fact that a child and their family had withdrawn from justice proceedings, but acknowledged the immense pressure they faced:

“
Our social fabric plays a huge role, whether exploitation or abuse is online or in person. The moment something like this happens, the first reaction is always, ‘Our honour is at stake, we will be stigmatized.’ Especially if the victim is a girl, then the pressure is even greater: ‘Tomorrow she has to get married, how will we move in society, how will we face people, what will we do?’ So society itself creates immense pressure, and usually the first attempt of parents is to compromise. (FW)

Interviewees explained that, for many families, compromise or silence become a survival strategy. While offences against children under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act cannot be settled through private agreement between the parties,⁷⁹ financial settlements are frequently offered and may appear more viable than continued litigation. This is particularly the case for low-income families facing the combined effects of social stigma, intimidation and financial pressure, as one professional interviewed explained:

“
While we tried our best that they continue this case and pursue it, but their social life was being damaged. People had started to find out that their daughter was in an institution and why she was there. Rumours began around their home. They found it better to step back from the case. On the other side, the financial benefit was also in their sight. For these reasons, they settled and wound up the case. (FW)

The persistence of such informal settlements points not only to gaps in the practical enforcement of the prohibition on private agreements, but also to a broader need for awareness-raising among families and their legal

⁷⁹ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 43(2).

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representatives on why private agreements are unsuitable in cases of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse. Unlike civil disputes, sexual exploitation and abuse against children are serious criminal offences and violations of the child's rights, so resolving such cases through private financial arrangements risks reducing the harm suffered by the child to a negotiable matter of compensation, while allowing perpetrators to evade criminal responsibility and potentially continue harming other children. It can also undermine the child's right to access justice, support service and legal remedies, particularly where family decisions are shaped by financial hardship or social pressure.

Indeed, informal settlements or withdrawal should not be interpreted as a lack of resilience or commitment: rather, they reflect rational decision-making within a social context and justice system that amplify harm instead of alleviating it.

Without sustained efforts to challenge these dynamics and reinforce the recognition of such acts as serious crimes warranting accountability, children and families will likely keep facing the types of pressure described above, regardless of the legal protections in place. The same professional underscored that, if families were better supported by their communities, they would be more likely to pursue cases, contributing not only to strengthened accountability for perpetrators but also to the deterrence of future offences:

“

Because if society had supported them, then definitely they would have fought the case properly, they would have gotten the culprit punished, and it would have set an example that those who ever attempt such an act could be punished. Now, in this case, what happened was reconciliation under pressure from society and family members. The proceedings stopped there. (FW)

”

While child-centred judicial reforms are needed, they are unlikely to be sufficient on their own if victim-blaming, stigma surrounding sexual offences and entrenched norms around honour and shame continue to shape responses to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in ways that discourage engagement with justice.

Preserving, collecting and using digital evidence

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act establishes a comprehensive framework for the collection and preservation of electronic evidence. It allows courts to issue warrants for the search, seizure, disclosure and real-time recording of data.⁸⁰ The Act also authorizes designated officers to issue expedited preservation and acquisition orders where there is a risk that evidence may be altered, lost or destroyed, provided that the court is notified within 24 hours for subsequent approval.⁸¹ To support this framework, the Act imposes a minimum one-year data retention obligation on service providers, ensuring that relevant traffic data remains accessible for investigative purposes during that period.⁸²

While digital evidence – including call logs, social media messages, images and videos – is often central to securing convictions in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, professionals identified significant gaps in current practices that undermine both effective prosecution and child-centred justice.

⁸⁰ Ibid., sections 33, 34, 39.

⁸¹ Ibid., section 31.

⁸² Ibid., sections 2(1)(xxviii), 32.

Deletion of digital evidence due to fear and stigma

Children and caregivers may delete digital evidence as an immediate response to distress due to intense fear, shame and stigma surrounding sexual abuse. This may be an attempt to end the abuse, prevent further circulation of images or avoid discovery by family or community members. For many families in Pakistan, deleting evidence is perceived as an act of protection rather than obstruction, driven both by the urgency to limit harm and by a potential lack of awareness of the evidentiary value of such material.

However, professionals consistently emphasized that deleted digital evidence critically weakens cases and can result in acquittals. In one case recalled by a front-line worker, the perpetrator was acquitted primarily due to the absence of digital evidence:

“

Out of fear and panic, victims delete chats and records. By doing so, they unknowingly destroy the very evidence needed to prosecute the abuser. (FW)

”

Some professionals described relying on improvised strategies to mitigate such risks:

“

I told her to delete his number but take screenshots of the chats and bring printouts. This is a fine legal point that not everyone knows. (FW)

”

While such approaches could support prosecutions in some cases, they also raise legal concerns, as the handling of certain forms of digital evidence outside formal investigative procedures, particularly child sexual abuse material, may expose those involved to potential criminal liability.

More importantly, these accounts suggest that the burden of preserving digital evidence may be effectively placed on children or their families by professionals. Shifting this core responsibility from law enforcement onto children and their families makes the ability to pursue justice contingent not on the occurrence of harm, but on whether digital evidence was preserved by individuals who are neither trained nor supported to manage it in moments characterized by panic and urgency. This approach also points to potential limitations in police capacity: while digital content may be deleted from a user's device, it should still be recoverable through forensic analysis or by obtaining data from online platforms and service providers. Where such recovery does not occur, this suggests serious gaps in police capacity or cooperation with technology companies that need to be addressed through capacity-building programmes and the allocation of adequate resources to prevent the collapse of otherwise substantiated claims.

Digital evidence is undervalued relative to physical evidence

Professionals reported that digital evidence is frequently treated as secondary to physical or forensic evidence, which creates a significant barrier to initiating justice proceedings in cases where no physical contact abuse is alleged or proven. One lawyer described a case in which police refused to register a complaint despite extensive digital evidence:

“

They said, 'For all we know, you may have created these chats yourselves.' This shows a major failure of our system – that digital evidence is not given the importance it deserves. (JP)

”

This account suggests that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse may be implicitly treated as less serious than in-person abuse by law enforcement, which in turn appears to shape evidentiary expectations. The emphasis on physical or forensic proof for non-contact harm can therefore be seen as reflecting this perception, with digital evidence often discounted not because

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it lacks probative value, but because the harm it documents is not consistently recognized as warranting an equivalent legal response.

This points to the need for targeted capacity-building efforts within police forces and justice professionals on the assessment and admissibility of digital evidence (including texts, chats, images and videos but also records of financial transactions, etc.), with a particular focus on addressing underlying perceptions that may minimize the seriousness of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Such efforts should be accompanied by training and robust protocols on the handling of digital evidence, to ensure that any increase in knowledge and capacity is matched by safeguards that adequately protect the rights and well-being of the children concerned.

Breaches in the chain of custody and misuse of evidence

Authorized officers collecting electronic evidence must use appropriate technical measures to preserve its integrity and maintain the chain of custody, and ensure that data in their possession is not disclosed to any other person or to the public.⁸³ Authorized officers who, having access to material or data containing personal information about another person, disclose it knowing that such disclosure is likely to compromise its confidentiality or cause harm, commit an offence punishable by up to three years in prison.⁸⁴

Despite these legal safeguards, fear that sensitive information or child sexual abuse material would not be handled confidentially emerged as a significant concern. Professionals described instances in which visual evidence was circulated among police networks or otherwise mishandled, noting that such evidence may be printed, copied, shared digitally or viewed unnecessarily by multiple professionals throughout investigations and trials. As a result, several lawyers reported deliberately limiting the sharing of visual evidence with law enforcement to reduce the risk of further exposure: *“Evidence should remain with as few people as possible. Otherwise, the child’s material*

continues to circulate” (JP). Some professionals described proactive efforts to minimize harm, such as submitting evidence while strictly controlling access:

“

I consider it my responsibility that the incriminating material coming to me does not unnecessarily reach male law enforcement... [...]... If objectionable images are printed and copied, the child’s identity is leaked. We need to be more victim-protective, not reckless. (JP)

”

However, these practices do not appear to be standardized technical or procedural safeguards, such as encrypted storage, but rather rely on individual discretion to limit the misuse of evidence. In a context where leaked content can spread rapidly through social media and messaging platforms, even a single breach can irreversibly harm a child’s dignity and safety. These fears severely erode confidence that reporting will protect children from further harm, thereby contributing to families’ decisions to limit engagement with the formal justice system.

Access to compensation

Access to compensation is an essential element of the right to justice for survivors, providing both recognition of and material redress for the harm they have suffered. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act empowers courts to order compensation for victims of tech-facilitated offences, without prejudice to their right to pursue civil remedies for the recovery of damages beyond the amount awarded.⁸⁵ In addition to this specific provision, the Criminal Procedure Code authorizes criminal courts to direct that fines imposed upon conviction be applied as compensation for any loss, injury, mental anguish or psychological harm resulting from a criminal offence, or to cover prosecution-related expenses.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid., sections 35(3), 35(4).

⁸⁴ Ibid., section 41.

⁸⁵ Ibid., section 45.

⁸⁶ Islamic Republic of Pakistan (1898). [Code of Criminal Procedure](#), sections 545(a), 545(b).

In addition, the Human Rights Relief and Revolving Fund, overseen by the Ministry of Human Rights, is intended to provide victims of human rights violations, including offences related to child sexual exploitation, with access to emergency financial assistance to cover medical expenses. The maximum disbursement available to victims is PKR 10,000.⁸⁷ However, this relatively modest amount may be insufficient to cover the full range of medical and psychological services that children subject to (tech-facilitated) sexual exploitation and abuse often require.

Although no direct questions were asked about compensation during the interviews, professionals did not discuss cases in which financial compensation had been pursued or awarded through the formal justice system, despite the existence of a legal framework that would allow children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse to pursue such remedies.

⁸⁷ PAHCHAAN (2023). Personal communication.

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Protecting children against sexual exploitation and abuse requires a strong understanding of the broader societal and systemic factors that enable violence against children. It requires an understanding of perpetrators' motivations, how they perpetrate and the ways in which they exploit opportunities to harm children. The Disrupting Harm research does not include insights from perpetrators or offenders. However, this area remains an important element in understanding how best to prevent tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. The data reveal several patterns in how perpetrators operate. Even though their tactics may change over time, these findings remain an important starting point to identify areas for prevention.

Policy and institutional initiatives

Pakistan does not have a dedicated national policy specifically addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. However, relevant commitments and preventive measures can be found across a range of broader policy frameworks and initiatives. Notably, during the First Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children, Pakistan pledged to strengthen and better enforce child protection laws, including those addressing online sexual exploitation and abuse.⁸⁸ This commitment reflects growing recognition of the need to strengthen protections for children in digital environments and provides an important foundation for future policy development, building on existing but fragmented policy and legislative frameworks.

For example, the National Policy Framework on Human Rights 2022–2027 broadly calls for the adoption of measures to protect all children from all forms of violence and abuse, including sexual exploitation, child sexual abuse material and social media- and cyber-related crimes, and promotes the integration of human rights into the education curriculum.⁸⁹ However, the framework is general in scope and does not set out specific preventive

actions. Similarly, the National Cyber Security Policy 2021 launched by the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (the most recent iteration of this policy as of February 2026) does not address online child protection or tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.⁹⁰

Despite the absence of a dedicated national policy framework, several public institutions have implemented prevention-oriented initiatives aimed at strengthening child protection in the digital environment.

The National Commission on the Rights of the Child's Action Plan 2023–2026 includes awareness-raising campaigns on bullying, digital safety and child sexual exploitation and abuse.⁹¹ It also provides for the development of a policy brief on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse as part of its strategy to build local partnerships for research and interventions.⁹² In February 2024, the National Commission, with technical support from UNICEF and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, published a *Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan* that outlined issues and challenges directly related to prevention. The report highlighted that, although computer education is part of the curriculum in most schools, students are not sufficiently informed about the risks associated with the use of technology, nor are they systematically taught how to protect themselves both online and in person. It further indicated that many teachers do not possess adequate knowledge or skills in this regard.⁹³ The report recommended that provincial governments adopt child protection policies to better structure and coordinate prevention and response efforts addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.⁹⁴

Institutional coordination mechanisms have also been established, though their operational status remains uncertain. In January 2021, the Federal Ombudsman created a National Task Force on Prevention and Control of Cybercrimes against Children, bringing together key

88 Government of Pakistan (2024). [Government pledge: Pakistan](#).

89 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Ministry of Human Rights (2022). [National Policy Framework on Human Rights 2022-2027](#), 14–15.

90 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, National Commission on the Rights of the Child (2024). [Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan](#), 68.

91 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, National Commission on the Rights of the Child (2023). [Action Plan 2023–2026](#), 2.

92 Ibid., 9.

93 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, National Commission on the Rights of the Child (2024). [Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan](#), 81.

94 Ibid., 96.

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stakeholders, including law enforcement, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and parliamentarians.⁹⁵ The Task Force included an Awareness-Raising Subcommittee, which worked to promote changes to education curricula and coordinate media campaigns conducted by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and other actors. However, the *Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan* deplored the fact that the Task Force was “dysfunctional”, and recommended that it be reactivated.⁹⁶ In a May 2025 communication to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Government of Pakistan said the Task Force was playing a vital role in addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation but provided no further details.⁹⁷ The Task Force’s status remained unclear as of February 2026.

Prevention efforts are also being advanced through digital literacy and awareness initiatives led by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. These include digital literacy seminars and programmes for students, teachers and parents in educational settings,⁹⁸ education campaigns in collaboration with stakeholders such as UNICEF, the National Commission on the Rights of the Child and Telenor Pakistan,⁹⁹ and training of trainers workshops in collaboration with platforms such as TikTok, among other stakeholders.¹⁰⁰ In addition, the Authority’s website offers awareness-raising guidebooks for parents, teachers and children addressing topics such as child sexual abuse material, online grooming and the safe use of social media.¹⁰¹ It also provides child-friendly video clips addressing issues such as blackmail, cyberbullying and digital privacy,¹⁰² as well as video resources aimed at supporting parents in protecting their children online.¹⁰³

More recently, broader policy discussions have emerged with the Ministry of Human Rights and the World Health Organization initiating consultations with relevant partners and experts in November 2025 to prepare a Strategic Action Plan on Prevention of Violence Against Children based on the INSPIRE Framework.¹⁰⁴ This Framework recognizes online exploitation as a form of sexual violence against children and is centred on establishing safe environments, strengthening parent and caregiver support, enhancing response and support services, and promoting education and life skills.¹⁰⁵ The development of the Strategic Action Plan presents an opportunity to integrate measures addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse across all these pillars more systematically, including proactive measures to address emerging risks such as artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material.

Prevention efforts through the lens of professionals

Misframing the problem

Professionals in Pakistan consistently framed tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse as the outcome of rapid digital expansion combined with low digital literacy among children and parents. The growing availability of smartphones, early exposure to social media and limited parental oversight were repeatedly identified as central drivers. Within this framing, children were positioned as particularly vulnerable due to inexperience, and parents as insufficiently prepared to manage technological change. As one professional explained:

95 The News International (2021). [Task force constituted to curb cybercrimes against children](#).

96 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, National Commission on the Rights of the Child (2024). [Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan](#), 69.

97 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2025). [Replies of Pakistan to the list of issues in relation to its report submitted under article 12 \(1\) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography](#). CRC/C/OPSC/PAK/RQ/1, paragraph 35.

98 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, National Commission on the Rights of the Child (2024). [Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan](#), 66.

99 See, for instance, UNICEF Pakistan (2024). [Making the Internet Safer for Every Child](#).

100 See, for instance, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (2026). [PTA Conducts Training of Trainers Program on Safe and Responsible Social Media Use](#); Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (2024). [PTA Launches Training Program to Enhance Child Online Protection and Digital Safety](#).

101 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (accessed on 16 February 2026). [Awareness Content: Guidebooks](#).

102 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (accessed on 16 February 2026). [Awareness Content: Children](#).

103 Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (accessed on 16 February 2026). [Awareness Content: Parents](#).

104 World Health Organization (2025). [WHO and Pakistan initiate consultations to protect 112 million children from violence](#).

105 See World Health Organization (2016). [INSPIRE: seven strategies for ending violence against children](#).

“

Children need awareness about cell phone use and social media tools. They should be taught not to share private things, even messages or pictures. (FW)

”

This construction situates risk primarily within children's behaviour in digital spaces rather than in offender intent, structural conditions or sociocultural norms that enable sexual abuse or exploitation. It reflects how stereotypes about childhood, gender and risk frame ideas about prevention: children are naïve, technology is inherently risky and harm can be mitigated through behavioural correction and supervision. The emphasis on restrictive measures such as banning phones in schools – *“principals... completely banned the use of cell phones for children during class studies”* (FW) – illustrates how risk is understood as stemming from children's access rather than perpetrator strategies, violence-permissive norms or platform design. Such reasoning risks shifting responsibility onto children to manage threats that they have little control over in reality because they are caused by often hidden systems, social and power structures.

Balancing awareness with blame

Across interviews, professionals strongly emphasized educating children about online risks. However, this education was frequently described in prescriptive terms and focused on what children should not do. For example, one professional highlighted teaching children:

“

...not to share any inappropriate messages... especially girls, because we know pictures can be edited and misused. (FW)

”

While awareness-raising is an important component of prevention, the emphasis on children's role in prevention raises concerns. It

risks implying that victimization results from children's choices rather than from perpetrator manipulation or coercion. This framing stands in tension with professionals' own case descriptions, which overwhelmingly involved grooming, coercion, extortion and abuse of trust. In such contexts, awareness alone would likely have been insufficient to prevent harm.

Survey findings further complicate the assumption that digital skills alone are protective. While children reported possessing various online safety skills, our statistical analyses show that these did not appear to reduce the likelihood of being subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse. This may partly reflect the specific skills measured in the survey, but it also suggests structural limits to skills-based prevention. Many commonly promoted strategies – such as blocking contacts or adjusting privacy settings – are reactive measures that come into play only after harm has begun.

When prevention messaging focuses predominantly on children's behaviour, it may obscure the tactics used by offenders and the broader sociocultural dynamics – including stigma and gender norms – that facilitate exploitation. If left unchallenged, such narratives risk contributing to self-blame and silence among children subjected to exploitation and abuse.

Parents perceived as primary gatekeepers

Parents were consistently positioned as the central line of defence against tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. A dominant theme across interviews was that prevention depends primarily on parental supervision and responsibility. As a front-line professional asserted directly: *“the first negligence lies with the parents”*. In another instance, a police officer stated:

“

Children's upbringing is primarily the responsibility of parents... due to the lack of supervision, this offence occurred. If there had been proper supervision, this occurrence would not have happened. (FW)

”

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This framing locates risk within family oversight rather than in offender behaviour or broader structural conditions. While parents undeniably play a critical role in children's lives, presenting exploitation and abuse primarily as the result of parental negligence simplifies the complex dynamics revealed in the accounts of exploitation and abuse highlighted in this report. It places what may be an unrealistic burden on caregivers – particularly in contexts of economic hardship, long working hours and limited digital literacy. Moreover, it risks reinforcing shame among families whose children have been exploited, potentially discouraging disclosure and help-seeking by placing blame on parents for failing to prevent harms.

Communication versus surveillance

A smaller number of professionals emphasized relational approaches centred on trust, openness and communication. As identified by one justice professional, children and young people need parents to provide a safe space for during their transition to adulthood:

“

Children should at least be able to sit with their parents, spend quality time and share openly what is happening with them. (JP)

”

Similarly, a law enforcement professional argued that disclosure depends on emotional closeness: children must be:

“

Raised... close enough to them, that if any such accident happens, children can frankly and freely share it with their parents. (FW)

”

While there appears to be some understanding of the importance of creating positive, open parent-child relationships as a tool to reduce harms, such relational approaches were less common than surveillance-oriented solutions. In contrast, many professionals focused on reenforcing to

parents the need for monitoring and controlling digital behaviour:

“

If you don't keep an eye on their use of social media... this is how children go astray. (FW)

”

In another case, parents were advised to “keep a watchful eye on their daughter to prevent her from engaging in risky activities again” (FW).

These narratives frame exploitation as the result of children “going astray,” reinforcing victim-blaming rather than acknowledging coercion, manipulation or abuse of trust. The contrast between communication-based and surveillance-based prevention reflects deeper tensions in how responsibility is conceptualized – whether safety is built through trust and dialogue, or through control and restriction. Helping caregivers and practitioners recognize signs of coercion or abuse, and to communicate about exploitation and abuse in ways that reduce stigma and victim-blaming, can make it easier for children to disclose or seek help. Prevention strategies should empower children to understand risks and seek support, rather than relying primarily on surveillance or restriction, which can undermine trust and drive harmful experiences further underground.

Constructing the perpetrator: the stranger danger narrative

As found in this study, children are more likely to be subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation or abuse by someone they already know. However, when discussing who children must be protected from, professionals frequently referred to unknown or suspicious individuals. For example, one professional advised that children should:

“

Stay away from strangers or suspicious individuals... and block or stop talking to anyone who raises suspicion of sexual abuse. (JP)

”

Similarly, a school-based programme warned children not to approach lone males:

“

...Whether at his doorstep, whether for tuition, whether at school, whether in a madrassa – there are chances that the child can be abused. (FW)

”

While vigilance is important, this emphasis on stranger danger does not fully align with either the survey findings or qualitative accounts, indicating that exploitation and abuse often involve known adults, peers or trusted authority figures.

Overemphasizing unknown perpetrators may obscure risks within children's social and institutional environments. It also underexplores how technology facilitates exploitation and abuse by known actors, including the use of images for coercion, extortion and enforced silence. By centring prevention on avoiding strangers, the burden is again placed onto children and attention may be diverted from relational grooming tactics and structural vulnerabilities.

Restriction and control as prevention

Prevention strategies were frequently centred on restriction. A child protection officer suggested, “a child of a certain age cannot use social media... Some parental law should ensure that only a family member of older age can supervise” (FW). Another law enforcement professional argued that parents should control passwords and app installations, noting that applications such as Telegram increase the “chances of... being abused” (FW).

These proposals reflect a protection-over-participation paradigm. While restrictions may reduce certain exposures, overly prohibitive approaches risk excluding children from the benefits of digital engagement and skill development. They may also encourage concealment: children who fear punishment or blame may hide their online interactions or avoid reporting exploitation and abuse. This is a difficult balance to create in legislation and in practice.

Notably, a minority of professionals challenged this logic. As one law enforcement officer argued, “banning is not the way... What will we keep banning? Education is the real solution” (FW). This suggests some internal debate within the sector about the appropriate rights-based balance between control, empowerment and shared responsibility.

Awareness, stigma and silence

Awareness-raising was the most consistently proposed prevention strategy across interviews. One officer explained, “people are often unaware of the seriousness of this issue... Most cases are silenced – covered up, deleted or dismissed” (FW). Another observed, “Parents have awareness of physical safety but not online safety” (FW). Professionals advocated integrating content on online grooming and exploitation within school curricula:

“

There should be one topic... in which we make our children aware: what online grooming is, what online trapping is. (FW)

”

However, discussions of sexual abuse remain culturally sensitive. As one professional acknowledged:

“

In our culture, we have this concept of shame... mothers... often keep this as a taboo subject. (JP)

”

This culture of silence creates conditions that perpetrators can exploit. Without addressing stigma, honour-based norms and victim-blaming attitudes, awareness initiatives alone may struggle to translate into earlier disclosure, institutional engagement or meaningful prevention.

6. PREVENTION EFFORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Shifting the prevention focus to perpetrators and systems

The data reveal several patterns in how perpetrators operate. Even though perpetrators' tactics may change over time, these findings remain an important starting point to identify areas for prevention. Across interviews when referring to underlying causes or prevention of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse,

there was limited focus on perpetrators – their profiles, tactics and motivations or the systems enabling them. Few professionals discussed abuse of power, sociocultural norms, multisectoral collaboration or the responsibilities of internet service providers and digital platforms. Prevention narratives centred predominantly on parents and children, with little examination of offender accountability or structural enablers.



Spotlight: Finding and removing content – Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act expressly states that online platforms and other service providers are not subject to any obligation to proactively monitor or inquire into material or content that is hosted, cached, transmitted or otherwise made available through their services.¹⁰⁶ While social media platforms must supply users with easily accessible procedures for submitting complaints about unlawful content and maintain an effective and transparent procedure to handle such complaints,¹⁰⁷ the current framework provides limited incentive to deploy proactive detection and blocking solutions, particularly given the high threshold for holding online platforms accountable for illegal third-party content.

Indeed, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act protects service providers from civil and criminal liability for unlawful activity or content on their systems, except where they had specific knowledge of the conduct and intentionally assisted in facilitating it.¹⁰⁸ Responsibility for proving such knowledge and intent rests on the person alleging it: they must identify the specific content or conduct at issue, including account IDs, URLs, top-level domains, IP addresses or other relevant identifiers, and clearly state the legal basis of the claim.¹⁰⁹ These requirements place a significant procedural burden on complainants, demanding a level of technical precision that may be difficult for some users to meet.

Despite these constraints, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act does provide mechanisms for the removal of unlawful online content. It grants the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority the power to remove or block access to such content, or to issue orders to that effect, where it considers such action necessary in the interest of public morality or in relation to offences under the Act.¹¹⁰ The Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority can also instruct social media platforms to remove or block “obscene or pornographic” illegal content online.¹¹¹ In cases involving child sexual abuse material, the guardian of the child depicted may apply directly to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to have the content removed, destroyed or blocked.¹¹² Any child sexual abuse material referred to this Authority shall also be transferred to the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency for investigative purposes.¹¹³ However, this framework ultimately places primary responsibility for securing removal on guardians and public authorities, underscoring the need for stronger and more proactive child protection obligations for online platforms.

106 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 38(5).

107 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2025). [Act No. II of 2025 further to amend the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016](#), section 3 (New Chapter 1B, section 2S).

108 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 38(1).

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid., section 37(1).

111 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2025). [Act No. II of 2025 further to amend the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016](#), section 3 (New Chapter 1B, section 2R(f)).

112 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). [Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, as amended in 2023](#), section 22(2).

113 Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2016). Ibid., section 30D; Islamic Republic of Pakistan (2025). [Act No. II of 2025 further to amend the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016](#), section 8.

This imbalance suggests a critical prevention gap. Shifting the focus towards perpetrators would involve addressing how individuals exploit moral codes, positions of authority and trusted environments – including schools, religious institutions and community spaces. It would also require strengthening safe reporting pathways so that “cases [are not] *silenced covered up, deleted, or dismissed*” (FW). Early intervention is only possible if children and families feel safe from stigma and blame when disclosing exploitation and abuse.

Taking advantage of power dynamics or economic vulnerability: Perpetrators exploit any leverage they have over children to coerce them into compliance. This includes taking advantage of power dynamics between a child and an adult or someone in power, offering money and gifts, using deception or applying threats and fear. Economic vulnerability can make children more likely to be targeted, as perpetrators exploit situations where families face financial hardship.

Taking advantage of a lack of community support: Perpetrators often take advantage of social norms, stigma and taboos to force children to comply. Examples include threatening to tell parents about the child’s interactions with the perpetrator, especially if the child shared sexual content with the perpetrator online. Even when children are coerced into situations that may involve socially unacceptable behaviour and perpetrators threaten to expose them, it is vital that children know they will be met with support and protection, rather than blame or punishment for their perceived role in the exploitation and abuse. Fostering safe and supportive relationships between children and trusted adults is therefore crucial to safeguarding against these threats.

Non-consensual sharing of child sexual abuse material: Threats to share a child’s sexual images or videos are also a common tactic used by perpetrators. The emergence of easily accessible generative artificial intelligence tools has made it easier than ever for perpetrators to create fake (and increasingly realistic) sexual images and videos of children. While discussions about non-consensual sharing of children’s sexual images have often centred on self-generated content, this argument has become somewhat outdated, as anyone can now create realistic but fake sexual imagery of children. These developments call for platforms to directly prevent the creation and dissemination of this content and enforce stricter detection and take-down policies and mechanisms, while the justice system needs to adequately and urgently criminalize the creation and dissemination of child sexual abuse material.

Professional perspectives in Pakistan reveal a strong commitment to prevention through awareness and parental involvement. However, dominant narratives frame children as naïve actors requiring behavioural correction and parents as primary gatekeepers responsible for supervision. While these elements are important, an over-reliance on control and monitoring risks obscuring perpetrator strategies and reinforcing victim-blaming dynamics. Rebalancing prevention requires shifting from a protectionist, surveillance-heavy approach towards one that combines education with empowerment, addresses stigma, strengthens trusted relationships and centres perpetrator accountability. Only by aligning professional perceptions with the lived dynamics of tech-facilitated exploitation and abuse can prevention strategies effectively disrupt it.

7. CONCLUSION



7. CONCLUSION

To offer a nuanced understanding of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan, this report presented multiple viewpoints including those of children and young people, parents, front-line workers, justice professionals and law enforcement.

The findings demonstrate that this is not an emerging or isolated issue, but a large-scale and deeply embedded child protection challenge. The Disrupting Harm study has identified a range of conclusions which require urgent policy attention.

The findings of this report underscore that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan is not an isolated or purely digital phenomenon, but one that is deeply embedded in broader social, cultural and structural contexts. Technology plays a critical role in enabling exploitation and abuse – facilitating contact, coercion, recording and distribution – but the drivers of abuse extend beyond the digital environment. Perpetrators exploit existing inequalities, social norms and systemic gaps to target and control children.

Addressing this issue therefore requires a comprehensive, multisectoral response that goes beyond technological solutions. Strengthening legal frameworks, improving service provision, enhancing coordination across sectors and addressing harmful social norms are all essential components of an effective response. At the same time, creating safe environments for disclosure, empowering children with knowledge and support, and ensuring accountability for perpetrators are critical to disrupting cycles of exploitation and abuse.

Rapid digital expansion in Pakistan presents both opportunity and risk. Without strengthened safeguards, accountability mechanisms and social norm change, perpetrators will have access to exploit children in both online and in-person spaces. The findings of this report provide a clear evidence base to guide reform. Translating that evidence into coordinated, adequately resourced action is now an urgent policy imperative. Taking these positive steps and challenges into account, this report ends with evidence-based recommendations that have been workshopped and validated with national experts and stakeholders in Islamabad in April 2026.



8. RECOMMENDATIONS



8. RECOMMENDATIONS

INSIGHT 1

Tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan is not an isolated digital phenomenon but forms part of a broader context of violence that can be embedded in social, familial and educational settings. Prevention programmes require understanding of the reality of how these types of violence are perpetrated against children, and significant investment in research and community consultation to identify effective interventions that can be implemented at multiple levels of the community (i.e., families, schools, community groups, service providers and policy). Disrupting Harm findings in Pakistan underscore that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse cannot be effectively addressed through interventions that focus only on digital safety skills or online monitoring. Survey data do not show a significant association between the time children spend online, or their digital skills, and their exposure to tech-facilitated sexual abuse, and this is reflective of most findings in countries participating in the Disrupting Harm project.

Instead, it requires an integrated response that strengthens child protection systems, embeds digital safety and bodily autonomy within family, education and social structures, ensures child-centred justice and holds perpetrators accountable – while addressing the social norms that enable silence and impunity.

Recommendation 1: Address underlying conditions enabling exploitation

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Social Welfare Development (all provinces), Education (all provinces), Health (all

provinces), Police (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority

Address the underlying conditions that enable perpetrators to exploit children, including stigma, unequal power relations and lack of accountability, through a coordinated systems-based approach. These efforts should include the following:

- Invest in social and behaviour change programmes to address stigma discouraging disclosure, including fear of honour-based abuse, social exclusion, and victim-blaming attitudes.
 - Engage stakeholders through clearly defined roles, including teachers, parents, religious leaders, community leaders, youth, media actors, police, prosecutors and the judiciary.
 - Work with stakeholders to co-design culturally appropriate, evidence-informed interventions that reduce secondary victimization and strengthen community-level accountability.
 - Adopt inclusive approaches that address diverse and intersecting harms, including:
 - Gendered harms, such as extortion and forced marriage affecting girls
 - Stigma and under-recognition of exploitation and abuse affecting boys
 - Harms faced by children of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and children with disabilities
 - Strengthen the capacity of front-line service providers through mandatory, standardized, continuous and regularly evaluated training on recognizing and responding to barriers to disclosure using trauma-informed and gender-sensitive approaches. This should apply across all relevant sectors, including justice, police, social services and other front-line responders.
- Streamline prevention and response systems for tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse within existing child protection and child marriage prevention frameworks to avoid fragmentation and improve sustainability.
- Prevention efforts should be complemented by further exploration of the drivers of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including the push and pull factors that shape demand. This should also include closer examination of exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peers in order to inform

more effective and targeted prevention and rehabilitative approaches.

- Partner with electronic print, and digital media, through funded and strategic collaborations, to:
 - Promote ethical reporting on child sexual exploitation and abuse, including the development and implementation of sector-wide guidelines and professional standards, based on international standards, which explicitly prohibit victim-blaming, ensure the use of appropriate terminology and safeguard children's identities. Reporting should avoid any framing that could imply responsibility on the part of the child or include details that may lead to identification.
 - Promote survivor-centred narratives.
 - Raise awareness of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
 - Challenge misconceptions that sexual violence is only physical.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen educational initiatives for children

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Education (all provinces), Academia, Civil Society Organizations

Strengthen educational initiatives and existing programmes to equip children and adolescents with knowledge and skills that support their rights, well-being and safe relationships. These efforts should include the following:

- Integrate age-appropriate, rights-based education on healthy relationships, consent, bodily autonomy and sexuality into national and provincial curricula, aligned with social and emotional learning frameworks.
- Extend these concepts to digital environments, including understanding coercion, grooming and exploitation in online interactions.
- Complement this with digital literacy education that builds children's ability to:
 - Critically assess online interactions.
 - Recognize and report exploitative or abusive behaviours.
 - Seek support when needed.

- Clearly define target groups (e.g., age groups, in-school versus out-of-school children) and assign responsibility for delivery across education authorities.
- Strengthen teacher capacity through pre-service and in-service training, including guidance on facilitating sensitive discussions and responding to disclosures.
- Ensure coordination with parents and caregivers to reinforce learning and promote consistent messaging across home and school environments.
- Ensure messaging reinforces that children are not responsible for preventing exploitation and abuse, while equipping them with knowledge of their rights and available support systems for themselves or their peers.

Recommendation 3: Develop parenting programmes

Relevant for: Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, UNICEF Nutrition Specialist, Ministry of Human Rights, UNICEF Child Protection

Develop culturally appropriate, rights-based parenting programmes to strengthen trust and communication between parents and children and address harmful sociocultural norms. These efforts should include the following:

- Conduct formative research with caregivers and children to understand knowledge, attitudes, digital literacy and help-seeking behaviours across different contexts.
- Then develop and integrate parenting programmes within existing child protection, social welfare and community-based structures to ensure sustainability and scale in order to:
 - Build caregivers' capacity to support children's digital safety and online engagement, including practical guidance on navigating online harms.
 - Provide guidance on responding to disclosures in supportive, non-judgmental ways that reduce fear, shame and blame.
 - Promote open communication on relationships, sexuality and online experiences, while recognizing children's autonomy and comfort levels.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Align parenting initiatives with school-based programmes (e.g., social and emotional learning frameworks) to ensure consistency and reinforce protective environments, as well as to provide opportunities for community engagement during the development of policies and services.

Recommendation 4: Invest in Data, research and capacity-building

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Social Welfare Development (all provinces), Police (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics

Strengthen the evidence base and institutional capacity to respond to tech-facilitated sexual child exploitation and abuse through coordinated, government-led approaches. These efforts should include the following:

- Support ongoing data collection and research on the nature and scope of this form of exploitation and abuse, including emerging risks such as artificial intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material and tech-facilitated extortion.
- Ensure alignment with existing national studies and frameworks on child sexual exploitation and abuse to avoid duplication and strengthen comparability.
- Allocate funding and resources to research (including programme co-design), and monitor and evaluate prevention and early intervention programmes with service users
- Develop a clear implementation framework outlining roles, responsibilities, timelines and coordination mechanisms across national, provincial and district levels.
- Embed relevant legal frameworks (e.g., Anti-Rape Law, Juvenile Justice System Act) within programme design and implementation to strengthen accountability and enforcement.
- Develop sustainability and scale-up plans, including budgeting, institutionalization and capacity-building strategies, alongside decentralization across all parts of the country to ensure equitable reach and implementation nationwide.
- Strengthen communication and the visibility of interventions to improve awareness and uptake of services.

INSIGHT 2

The impact of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan extends far beyond the moment of abuse. It reshapes children's identities, futures, families and social belonging. Harmful consequences are driven by fear, stigma, gender norms and economic vulnerability. Without survivor-centred, family-inclusive and norm-transformative responses, harm persists long after the abuse ends. The findings make clear that addressing tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse requires responses that address psychological harm, stigma, economic barriers and system capacity to ensure that children subjected to exploitation and abuse are not revictimized throughout their lives.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen child protection systems

Relevant for: Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority, National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Child Protection (all provinces), Education (all provinces), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, National Commission on the Rights of the Child, National Cyber Emergency Response Team and other child online protection partners

Strengthen child protection systems to better address the continuum between online and in-person abuse and exploitation pathways. Efforts should include the development of a dedicated national policy framework on tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, informed by Disrupting Harm findings and other data, to provide a coherent and coordinated approach across prevention, protection and response, addressing current gaps across existing fragmented child protection, human rights and cybersecurity frameworks.

- This should be complemented by the explicit integration of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse into key national and provincial policy frameworks, including:

- o The next iteration of the National Cyber Security Policy
- o Child protection policies
- o The National Commission on the Rights of the Child's Action Plan
- Develop and implement national training curricula and standard operating procedures to ensure front-line services can respond to all forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, including:
 - o Online grooming for sexual purposes
 - o Sexual extortion
 - o Production and/or sharing of child sexual abuse material
 - o Live streaming of child sexual abuse
 - o Artificial intelligence-enabled harms
- Strengthen referral pathways to ensure timely, confidential and holistic responses, including in the child protection case management and referral system – provincial and territorial technical/capacity-building packages:
 - o Emergency medical care
 - o Sexual and reproductive health services
 - o Forensic evidence collection
 - o Safeguards for confidentiality and trauma-informed practice

Recommendation 2: Invest in mental health and psychosocial recovery

Relevant for: Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, Child protection (all provinces), Social Welfare Department (all provinces), Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority, Civil Society Organizations including: PAHCHAAN (Punjab); Balochistan Institute of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences; Drugs & Narcotics Educational Services for Humanity (DANESH) (Balochistan); and International Rescue Committee (IRC) (Balochistan)

Expand access to integrated immediate and long-term, trauma-informed mental health and psychosocial support that is free for children and their families. Efforts should include the following:

- Develop a cohort of specialized, gender-sensitive and trauma-informed child psychologists with standardized training and practices, ensuring nationwide accessibility. This may include:
 - o Adapting tertiary curricula to include trauma-informed care and specialized child psychology training
 - o Expanding service access to rural and underserved areas, including through partnerships with NGOs
- Integrate mental health support across systems, including:
 - o Child protection case management
 - o Law enforcement and justice processes
 - o Education and health systems
- Build capacity of all professionals working with children and families to apply trauma-informed principles.
- Ensure trained psychologists are embedded within:
 - o Child protection units
 - o Investigation teams
 - o Specialized courts

Recommendation 3: Develop gender-responsive and inclusive protocols

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), UNICEF Social and Behaviour Change, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Design and implement gender-responsive and inclusive protocols across child protection systems to address risks linked to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Efforts should include the following:

- Establish safe and confidential services that actively encourage disclosure by boys, recognizing stigma and restrictive gender norms.
- Integrate gender-specific digital risk considerations into identification and response protocols, ensuring online abuse is systematically assessed alongside in-person harm.
- Engage children and young people in the design of services to reflect how different genders experience and navigate online risks.

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Recommendation 4: Address victim-blaming and community attitudes

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), UNICEF Social and Behaviour Change, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Address victim-blaming attitudes at the community level to reduce revictimization of children. Efforts should include the following:

- Ensure effective national implementation and monitoring of legislation prohibiting marriage as a response to sexual abuse within child protection and justice systems.
- Develop and implement evidence-informed social and behaviour change programmes and awareness campaigns that:
 - Address harmful attitudes and behaviours supporting violence (both online and offline)
 - Highlight how stigma can be exploited by perpetrators to coerce and control children
 - Promote safe spaces for children to seek help
- Ensure all messaging is developed through safe and ethical consultation with children, families, teachers, community and religious leaders, and other duty bearers.
- Strengthen family-focused interventions, including:
 - Family counselling and mediation services to reduce blame, violence and abandonment following disclosure
 - Targeted support for caregivers – especially mothers – who may face disproportionate social and family pressure

Recommendation 5: Support front-line professionals to reduce burn-out

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Health (all provinces), Police (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Provide improved working conditions for front-line professionals and service providers to prevent burn-out. Efforts should include the following:

- Adequate staff resourcing to manage case loads
- Institutionalize supervision, psychosocial support and burn-out prevention measures for:
 - Child protection workers
 - Health professionals
 - Law enforcement personnel
 - Members of the judiciary
- Provide training and support to help professionals manage cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse involving:
 - Exploitation and abuse perpetrated by peers
 - Stigma
 - Threats
 - Honour-based harm

INSIGHT 3

Children in Pakistan subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse face multiple, compounding barriers to disclosure and reporting. According to professionals, community stigma, fear of dishonour and victim-blaming strongly discourage children and their families from seeking help. Professionals suggest that these fears are compounded by structural and institutional challenges, including instances of police inaction or procedural delays. For governmental and non-governmental partners, these findings highlight the urgent need for child-centred, gender-sensitive, family-oriented and community-informed approaches that make disclosure safe and reporting accessible while protecting children from further harm. Interventions focused solely on legal reform will fail unless paired with measures that address stigma, institutional practices, and safe and universally accessible reporting pathways. Without approaches that address the underlying causes of stigma and revictimization, harm persists long after the abuse ends.

Recommendation 1: Create a safe environment for help-seeking and reporting

Relevant for: Ministry of Human Rights, Zanib Alert, Response and Recovery Agency, Child Protection (all provinces), Police (all provinces), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Create an environment where children feel safe to seek help and engage with formal support services. Efforts should include the following:

- Align with a holistic social norms agenda to address harmful social norms that drive silence, including honour-based stigma, victim-blaming and fear of reputational harm, through sustained,

culturally grounded social and behaviour change initiatives.

- Engage communities, including parents, teachers, religious leaders and young people, in co-designing interventions that promote supportive responses to disclosure. Ensure trauma-informed mental health practitioners and child protection professionals:
 - Support children from the moment of disclosure
 - Accompany them throughout reporting, access to services and justice processes
 - Support (re)integration after case closure
- Strengthen legal, psychosocial and case management systems, including:
 - Practical accompaniment for families
 - Gender-sensitive guidance to caregivers to support decision-making about help-seeking

Recommendation 2: Improve accessibility of reporting pathways

Relevant for: Ministry of Human Rights, Zanib Alert, Response and Recovery Agency, Child Protection (all provinces), Police (all provinces), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Ensure existing reporting pathways are accessible for children, young people and families to safely disclose exploitation and abuse and seek help. Efforts should include the following:

- Strengthen a unified, well-publicized national reporting mechanism, building on existing platforms such as the 1121 Child Helpline, with clear pathways for all forms of exploitation and abuse.
- Ensure reporting options are confidential, child-friendly and gender-sensitive, and include anonymous channels across online and in-person platforms.
- Link reporting mechanisms to timely, coordinated responses, including psychosocial support, case management and safe take-down of abusive content.
- Improve coordination between relevant authorities (e.g., investigation bodies, regulatory agencies and the private sector) to enable rapid response and content removal.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase public awareness of reporting options and processes to address low visibility and confusion around where to seek help.

Note: Investment in reporting systems should be prioritized alongside efforts under Recommendation 1 to ensure a safe enabling environment so that reporting does not result in further harm to children.

Recommendation 3: Develop an integrated multi-sector response

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Social Work (all provinces), Education (all provinces), Health (all provinces), Police (all provinces), Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Strengthen system-wide capacity to prevent and respond to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse through coordinated, government-led approaches. Efforts should include the following:

- Establish a national implementation framework with clearly defined roles, responsibilities and coordination mechanisms across sectors (child protection, law enforcement, education, health and justice, private, community and religious sectors).
- Align responses with existing legal frameworks, including the Anti-Rape Law and Juvenile Justice System Act, and strengthen enforcement in cases of tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Expand and institutionalize case management systems, ensuring adequate human resources (e.g., psychologists, social workers, information technology and data personnel) and integration of community-based support networks.
- Provide ongoing, practical training for police, prosecutors, judiciary, health workers and social workers on trauma-informed, child-sensitive and gender-responsive approaches.
- Strengthen oversight and accountability mechanisms to address misconduct, delays and breaches of confidentiality

INSIGHT 4

Pakistan should establish a standardized child protection case management and referral system (technical packages, standard operating procedures, guidelines and an enforceable trauma-informed referral pathway) that ensures immediate psychological support and coordinated case management in every district for children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This is critical to ensuring that response mechanisms support rather than revictimize children. Without approaches that address the underlying causes of stigma and revictimization, harm persists long after abuse ends. This can jeopardize children's access to and the effectiveness of formal support services.

Recommendation 1: Embed trauma-informed services as a legal entitlement

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Ministry of Law and Justice, National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Embed trauma-informed services as a legal entitlement for children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Efforts should include the following:

- Amend federal and provincial frameworks to explicitly recognize recovery and rehabilitation as enforceable rights, rather than discretionary services.
- Codify free, trauma-informed and non-discriminatory standards within implementation rules and child protection regulations.
- Ensure that access to psychosocial support is not conditional upon filing a police complaint.

Recommendation 2: Expand and equalize geographic coverage of case management and support services

Relevant for: Child protection (all provinces), Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Expand and equalize access to case management and support services across all geographic regions. Efforts should include the following:

- Accelerate the establishment of District Child Protection Units to achieve full national coverage.
- Develop minimum service standards to ensure parity in service quality across provinces.
- Fund mobile and/or satellite trauma-informed teams to reach underserved and remote areas.

Recommendation 3: Institutionalize psychological safety in justice processes

Relevant for: Ministry of Interior, Home department (all provinces), Police (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Institutionalize psychological safety as a core requirement within justice processes. Efforts should include the following:

- Require pre-investigative psychological stabilization assessments for children subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, conducted by trained trauma-informed psychologists.
 - Establish a comprehensive legal and procedural framework for conducting forensic interviews with child victims of crime, ensuring that interviews are systematically carried out by specially trained professionals using child-centred and trauma-informed approaches. Trauma counsellors should support investigators in framing questions, recognizing signs of distress and adapting interactions to the child's situation, preference and needs including their gender, age and family environment.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen referral pathways to prevent fragmentation

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Police (all provinces)

Strengthen and formalize referral systems to ensure continuity of care and reduce re-traumatisation.

Efforts should include:

- Establish formal, written inter-agency referral protocols linking:
 - Cybercrime units
 - Child protection units
 - Anti-rape crisis cells
 - Private sector
 - Relevant NGOs
 - Media
- Introduce dedicated case coordinators to reduce repeated storytelling and minimize re-traumatisation of children.

Recommendation 5: Co-design systems-level family support interventions

Relevant for: Ministry of Human Rights, community-based child protection mechanisms/structures

Co-design and implement systems-level interventions to ensure children subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse are supported within their family environments. Efforts should include the following:

- Provide structured parental counselling as part of standard case management services.
- Develop honour-sensitive risk assessment tools to identify risks of honour-based abuse or honour-based crimes following disclosure.
- Integrate community norm-change programming alongside service provision to strengthen protective environments for children.

INSIGHT 5

Pakistan has taken important steps to address online harms through the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016, which criminalizes offences such as online grooming and child sexual abuse material with significant penalties. However, further legislative reforms are needed to ensure comprehensive protection for children from tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, including addressing gaps related to sexual extortion, livestreamed abuse, deliberate access to child sexual abuse material and digitally generated content. There is a need to fill gaps in legislation to ensure that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively. This could also support prevention by strengthening deterrence and signalling that all forms of exploitation and abuse are serious crimes.

Relevant for: Ministry of Law and Justice, Ministry of Information, Technology and Telecommunication, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Amend legislation to ensure that tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse can be prosecuted effectively. This could also support prevention by strengthening deterrence and signalling that all forms of exploitation and abuse are serious crimes. A package of legislative reforms to align with international standards could include the following:

- Harmonize the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act with other relevant legal and child protection frameworks to establish an integrated and coherent legal framework for addressing child sexual exploitation and abuse across both tech-facilitated and in-person contexts. This should include consistent definitions, terminology, offences and procedural safeguards across relevant laws, recognizing the overlap between tech-facilitated and in-person forms of abuse

and ensuring that legal protections and accountability mechanisms respond effectively to the full continuum of harm.

- Expand the legal definition of child sexual abuse material to fully align with international standards by amending the offence provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 to cover “any representation, by whatever means,” including non-visual forms such as audio-only content, ensuring consistency with the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.
- Revise the terminology used in the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 to replace in relevant provisions related to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse, the term “pornography” with the term “child sexual abuse material,” to ensure the use of language that accurately reflects the abusive nature of such material and recognizes that it is often used as a catalyst for further exploitation and abuse, in alignment with the [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse](#).
- Amend legislation to ensure that intentional access to child sexual abuse material through information and communication technologies constitutes a criminal offence.
- Amend legislation to explicitly criminalize livestreaming of child sexual abuse, either through a stand-alone provision or by clarifying that existing offences related to child sexual abuse material also apply when the abuse is streamed in real time without being recorded or stored.
- Adopt explicit legal provisions criminalizing tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children. While existing provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 may apply in some cases, a dedicated offence supported by a clear definition would better capture its specific dynamics, including the coercive use of sexual images or videos to obtain sexual acts, additional material or other benefits from a child.
- Amend the relevant provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 to explicitly cover the promise or offer of payment or other benefits, ensuring that attempts to exploit children can be prosecuted even when payment does not ultimately occur.

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- Provide legal clarity on digitally generated or manipulated child sexual abuse material to ensure existing provisions explicitly cover artificially generated or manipulated images and videos depicting a child in sexually explicit conduct, including material created using artificial intelligence-powered tools.

INSIGHT 6

According to professionals interviewed for this study, child-centred justice for many children subjected to tech-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse in Pakistan remains limited in practice. In the cases discussed by professionals interviewed, court procedures were often not adapted to children, with repeated questioning, exposure to the accused and the handling of sensitive digital evidence contributing to secondary victimization. Weak institutional capacity and inconsistent application of child-centred safeguards further undermine protective responses, leading many families to withdraw from formal proceedings. There is a need for national systems to be harmonized to ensure that child-centred justice prioritizes confidentiality, reduces re-traumatization, strengthens evidence handling and addresses sociocultural barriers. Targeted interventions can improve equitable access to justice, ensure consistent application of child-centred procedures and reinforce trust in formal systems by children and families in vulnerable situations.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen child-centred justice procedures and ensure consistent national implementation

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Police (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Prosecution department (all provinces), Ministry of Law and Justice, civil society organizations including Group Development Pakistan, Legal Aid Society, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Strengthen child-centred justice procedures and ensure consistent implementation across all jurisdictions. Efforts should include the following:

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Extend child-centred procedural safeguards (currently applied in some violence cases such as rape) to all forms of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. This can be achieved by amending the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and relevant procedural laws to ensure that safeguards under the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 apply to all relevant offences, including online grooming and tech-facilitated sexual extortion of children. These safeguards include, among others, video-recorded testimony (where appropriate and aligned with the child's needs, preference and situation), limits on repeated questioning and restrictions on direct cross-examination.
- Codify child-centred courtroom procedures for cases of (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse by incorporating survivor-centred judicial guidelines (e.g., those issued by the Islamabad High Court) into binding legislation, requiring closed hearings, remote testimony (where appropriate and aligned with the child's needs and preference), protective screens and the prohibition of displaying child sexual abuse material in court.
- Establish legally binding standards for forensic interviews with child victims of crime, ensuring:
 - Interviews are conducted once where possible
 - Use of child-friendly environments
 - Delivery by specially trained professionals
- Reduce repeated testimony and procedural delays by strengthening case-level coordination between police, courts, child protection authorities and social services, supported by standardized case tracking systems with clear timelines for (tech-facilitated) child sexual exploitation and abuse cases.
- Invest in child-friendly justice infrastructure, including dedicated child-friendly interview rooms or other designated spaces for children in courts, and ensuring the availability of trained female and male prosecutors and law enforcement officers to support safe and accessible disclosure, depending on the child's preference.
- Provide mandatory and continuous trauma-informed training for judges, lawyers and law enforcement personnel.

Recommendation 2: Improve handling and preservation of digital evidence

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Police (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Prosecution department (all provinces), Civil Society Organizations including: Group Development Pakistan, Legal Aid Society, Federal Criminal Prosecution Service, Punjab Forensic Science Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Strengthen safeguards for the handling and preservation of digital evidence involving children. Efforts should include the following:

- Operationalize provisions under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 through detailed protocols requiring:
 - Secure storage of digital evidence
 - Restricted access controls
 - Strict chain-of-custody procedures for child sexual abuse material
- Limit the number of officials permitted to access sensitive evidence and prohibit unnecessary copying, printing or display during investigations and proceedings.

Recommendation 3: Remove economic barriers to justice and care

Relevant for: Legal Aid and Justice Authority, Child Protection (all provinces) Civil Society Organizations including: Group Development Pakistan and Legal Aid Society

Implement national programmes to eliminate financial barriers that prevent access to justice and support services. Efforts should include the following:

- Provide financial support for children and families engaging with the justice system, including providing transport stipends, justice advocates to ensure case-navigation assistance and follow-up services for low-income families whose children have been subjected to tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse to reduce practical barriers to reporting, investigation and court participation.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure effective implementation of the right to state-funded legal aid under the Juvenile Justice System Act, including in cases of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse. Operationalize nationwide access to legal aid and victim support services by strengthening coordination mechanisms between legal aid providers, child protection authorities and law enforcement units handling cybercrime cases.
- Strengthen protections against intimidation or coercion by perpetrators with social or economic power.
- Allocate dedicated budget lines for child protection and tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse interventions, including legal aid, psychosocial support and child protection services, to ensure the sustainability and accessibility of support systems.

Recommendation 4: Enhance institutional law enforcement capacity and coordination

Relevant for: Child Protection (all provinces), Health (all provinces), Police (all provinces), National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency, Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority

Strengthen institutional capacity and coordination across justice and protection systems. Efforts should include the following:

- Establish intermediary reporting pathways beyond police stations to improve trust and accessibility.
- Strengthen cybercrime units and local law enforcement capacity, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas.
 - Expand mandatory specialized and continuous training for justice professionals handling cyber-enabled exploitation and abuse. Expand the specialized training requirement under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 to ensure that judges, prosecutors and investigators are trained in trauma-informed child interviewing, management of digital evidence and the specific dynamics of tech-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse.
 - Strengthen case-level coordination mechanisms between police, courts, child protection services and health systems to ensure timely and integrated responses to children subjected to (tech-facilitated) exploitation and abuse.
 - Develop and operationalize a management information system to support monitoring, case follow-up, referral pathways and data collection across justice and child protection institutions.

Recommendation 5: Build trust in formal justice systems

Relevant for: Legal Aid and Justice Authority, Child Protection (all provinces), Police (all provinces), Civil Society Organizations including: Group Development Pakistan and Legal Aid Society

Strengthen trust and accountability within justice systems for children, families and service providers. Efforts should include:

- Develop and enforce accountability mechanisms for misconduct and corruption within justice institutions.
- Promote transparent case tracking and regular communication with affected families, including clear procedural timelines and updates throughout the proceedings to reduce uncertainty and delays.
- Engage civil society to accompany and support children and families throughout legal processes.

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10. ANNEX: DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS



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Child sexual abuse: What defines an abusive act can be difficult to capture or to definitively categorize. The term ‘abuse’ often refers to treating another person in a cruel or violent way. The term often focuses on both the act (e.g. violent, non-consensual), as well as the effect of the act, e.g. causing bodily injury, pain (physical or emotional), distress, etc.

Child sexual abuse more specifically, refers to various sexual activities perpetrated on children (persons under 18), regardless of whether the children are aware that what is happening to them is neither normal nor acceptable. It can be committed by adults or peers and usually involves an individual or group taking advantage of an imbalance of power. It can be committed without explicit force, with perpetrators frequently using authority, power, manipulation or deception.¹¹⁴

Child sexual exploitation: Involves the same abusive actions mentioned above. However, an additional element of a threat or of exchange for something (e.g. money, shelter, material goods, or non-material components such as protection, a relationship, or even the mere promise of such) from a third party and/or the perpetrator must also be present.¹¹⁵

Child sexual abuse material, including AI-generated child sexual abuse material: Photos, videos, audios or other recordings, or any other representation of real or digitally generated (including generated through/by AI) child sexual abuse or sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.¹¹⁶

Livestreaming of child sexual abuse: Child sexual abuse that is perpetrated and viewed simultaneously in real-time via communication tools, video conferencing tools and/or chat applications. In most cases, the perpetrator requesting the abuse in exchange for payment or

other material benefits, is physically in a different location from the child(ren) and the facilitators of the abuse.¹¹⁷

Online grooming of children for sexual purposes/ solicitation of children for sexual purposes: Building a relationship with a child via technology with the intent of sexually abusing or exploiting the child.¹¹⁸

Sexual extortion of children: The blackmailing of a person with the help of self-generated images of that person in order to extort sexual favours, money or other benefits, under the threat of sharing the material beyond the consent of the depicted person (e.g. posting images on social media). Often, the influence and manipulation, typical of perpetrators of grooming over longer periods of time (sometimes several months), turns into a rapid escalation of threats, intimidation and coercion once the person has been persuaded to send the first sexual images of themselves.¹¹⁹

Sexual harassment: “Any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment,” as defined by the Istanbul Convention (art. 40), the only international legal definition of the term.¹²⁰

Children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour: This term refers to sexual behaviour or developmentally inappropriate sexual behaviour displayed by children and young people which is harmful or abusive.¹²¹

For further guidance on terminology and key considerations, refer to the [Terminology Guidelines](#) for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse.

¹¹⁴ Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Second Edition*, ECPAT, Bangkok, 2025, pp. 31–34.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 39–44.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 97–98.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 36–38.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 160.

