

Abuse of children

OFFICIAL statistics on child sexual abuse in the country are conspicuous by their absence. Thus, the occasional NGO report on this least-acknowledged form of child abuse is important to expose the reality about a hidden but menacing phenomenon. Significant in this respect is the latest annual report and data on child sexual abuse in Pakistan produced by Sahil, an organisation that works exclusively on the issue.

Although the number of child abuse cases appears to have declined in the past two years, the actual prevalence of this curse in our society is believed to be far greater than indicated by the 2,447, 2,321 and 1,838 — figures compiled from the print media — cases in 2006, 2007 and 2008 respectively. In most cases, the victims' acquaintances were found to be involved in their abuse. Since the most vulnerable group in this category comprises child labourers, millions more are believed to be at risk of sexual abuse. This picture underscores the importance of ensuring the implementation of existing legislation on the issue and of speeding up the promulgation of proposed laws on

child protection.

Since the 1996 Stockholm Declaration on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, of which Pakistan is a signatory, we have taken some steps to address the issue of child abuse. Measures have included introducing legislation and drafting a national policy and action plan on the subject. A group of seven NGOs conducted a study on child sexual abuse in Pakistan which helped the National Commission for Child Welfare and Development design a national policy and action plan against child sexual abuse and exploitation. Legislation has including the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance, the Prevention and Control of Human Trafficking Ordinance and the Destitute and Neglected Children's Act in Punjab.

However these laws have not been properly enforced nor has the action plan been implemented. A child protection bill is also waiting to be introduced in the National Assembly and a draft child protection policy has yet to be approved. In the meantime, greater efforts are required to sensitise society to child sexual abuse by spreading awareness in schools and at the community level.