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# Child abuse: the time to act is now

A university student in her mid-twenties lives with a scar, haunted by childhood memories. "I was sexually abused for several years as a child, by six different people," she told an NGO some time back, confirming that all her tormentors were adults whom she knew.

"I never told anyone, because I always thought it was my fault. Either I was in the wrong place at the wrong time or I had behaved in some way to deserve it," she said, adding that she accepted the abuse as something that just happened.

Another boy who was interviewed said he ran away to his sister's house after the factory owner where he worked sexually assaulted him. That night his brother-in-law, in whom he had confided, subjected him to similar treatment.

Such incidents are hardly uncommon in our society and elsewhere; in fact, they are just the tip of the iceberg. But in Pakistan, there is perhaps a greater tendency to ignore various forms of child sexual abuse. Male child prostitution is not only tolerated but seen as a status symbol in some parts of the country.

Rawalpindi's Pir Wadahi bus station and many other spots around the country that draw the marginalized and the poor, are notorious for children's exploitation. The question is what is being done either to eradicate or prevent it? Or to put it bluntly, is anything being done at all?

True, children have been abused throughout human history, but today the world community sees such abuse

as a serious, even criminal issue, not to mention the grave personal and family problems it stems from or gives rise to. There is no age limit when it comes to child sexual abuse; small babies as young as a year or even less, and children as little as six are subjected to such abuse, around the world. Sadly, in our society the issue has not attracted

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enough attention to warrant a serious debate amongst the various stakeholders.

The secretive and illicit nature of child trafficking and child abuse keeps it hidden from public view. In Pakistan, several non-government organisations are working on this issue, and bring out regular reports based on media re-

ports and direct interaction with abused children, to whom they provide some legal and psychological help.

The children narrate traumatic experiences, and when the media picks up these reports, there is momentary outrage that fades away until the next incident or report. Meanwhile, children around the country are coerced, kidnapped, sold and forced into commercial sex, for which there is a large market.

An eight-year-old boy in an Afghan Camp was molested at knifepoint, an act that became a recurring event in his life. "First I used to call these people bad names but later I received money from them, so then it was okay" (IRIN special report on child sexual abuse, Feb 21, 2001).

Children living in poor neighbourhoods and marginalised areas may be more prone to such abuse, but as in other socio-economic circles, their abusers are normally family members or persons known to them. Often child prostitution takes place with the knowledge and implicit consent of the victim's parents.

Studies show that children who have been victims of abuse develop tendencies to abuse others once they're older, thus propagating the continuing cycle of abuse and exploitation.

Child trafficking and abuse are clear violation of children's human rights. Such children are denied their rights to family, education and protection from exploitation and abuse, forcibly separated from their families and taken to

new places where they live alone and fearful. They are bound to their captors by threats, incarceration, debt bondage, fear and isolation. Many lose their lives but all lose their childhood.

Police are normally bribed to look the other way. The weak enforcement of law and lack of police resolve further aggravates the plight of children in our society. Although there is no shortage of laws to curb this crime, police indifference and indeed complicity exacerbates the situation. Often, instead of taking prompt action against the abusers, the police typically rounds up the children on the charges of petty theft; rarely is forced sex ever mentioned.

With all these factors in mind, prevention can be attempted at various levels, involving international organisations and the state, municipalities, local communities, schools and NGOs. This incorporates monitoring and socially supporting disadvantaged families, along with an increased emphasis on moral values and public awareness within each community. It entails educating children in schools about their inherent rights, and fostering a greater community spirit among neighbours.

Pakistan has ratified the U.N Convention on the Rights of the Child and is also a signatory to the Stockholm agenda and plan of action against sexual exploitation of children. The National Commission for Child Welfare and Development (NCCWD) has formulated various recommendations after studying various legislations on the

subject; however, even these are yet to be implemented. On the ground, there has been little headway in actually addressing this problem due to under-reporting and lack of adequate social and administrative structures to deal with it.

Significant efforts have to be made for the social welfare and recovery of children. Here, training law enforcement officials has to be accorded top priority, to equip them to deal with the traumatised children and families, a concept hitherto missing in Pakistan.

Preventing sexual exploitation of children cannot be achieved without the strict enforcement of laws that lead to harsh punishments for the perpetrators. The government must also introduce therapy programmes and rehabilitation for the survivors.

If we are to make any headway on the child rights issue all the stakeholders must get involved, the government and civil society, and genuinely co-operate. Awareness-raising on the rights of children and the trafficking industry is essential at all levels: media, communities and families, as well as young people.

Only commitment from all levels of government, international organisations and local communities to combat poverty, promote education and uphold the rights of all children, will initiate a process to minimise or reduce the abuse of children.

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