[**Left hanging**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1640216/left-hanging)

[Shimaila Matri Dawood](https://www.dawn.com/authors/9399/shimaila-matri-dawood)Published August 12, 2021 - Updated a day ago

The writer is an award-wining journalist and heads a citizen’s advocacy group for child protection, Kasur Hamara Hai.

A MOUNTAIN is not so hard or as solid a structure as one may expect. Stranded for hours this Eid on the narrow winding roads straddling Pakistan’s northern towns, I had time to contemplate the masses of precariously arranged boulder and rock, long shorn from the main edifice, threatening to hurtle towards me. The crests of the Karakoram cavort playfully with the clouds, but negotiating them as a climber or traveller is no child’s play. Even a gentle mid-summer night’s drizzle can unleash loads of loosened stone down its sides, ready to crush anyone caught underneath.

Human hearts, on the other hand, can be far more cruel than killer rocks. Public officials unmoved to act when incidents of child rape, sodomy and murder proliferate, when tiny abused bodies are regularly found discarded in open sewers or garbage heaps, should not be called stones, for as our scriptures tell us, even stones sometimes split for fear of God.

They’re accomplices.

When seven-year-old Zainab Ansari’s body was thrown into a kachra kundi (garbage dump), Pakistanis vowed justice. Two years later, the human rights minister announced the Zainab Alert Response and Recovery Act. ZARRA is responsible for what its name suggests: creating and overseeing a missing child alert system; liaising with provinces to ensure a police rescue and response mechanism; and maintaining a digital, national, missing child case database. FIRs must be filed for children reported missing to ZARRA offices or district police and uploaded within two hours. But more than three years since her brutal murder, only Zainab’s killer, Imran Ali, has been executed; the rest of these actions have been left hanging.

No state agency can tell us how many children are missing or abused.

And so the kidnapping, torture, rape and murder of children continues undeterred. Six-year-old Maham from Korangi, Karachi, was much too young to have heard of Zainab. The officers in charge of Zaman Town police station certainly had, but criminally delayed filing an FIR when the distraught family came to them for help. An unofficial roznamcha entry, not necessitating a police rescue action, was recorded instead. Maham was found dead in a garbage heap the next morning. Mirroring the botched handling by another police station of a similar case, that of five-year old Marwa, an FIR was finally registered at 6:45 pm the evening of the following day. The bodies of both girls were found by citizens, not police; Marwa’s body was so mutilated she had to be identified by the dress she was wearing, bought to celebrate Independence Day.

The public, quick to praise the SSP in Maham’s case for the arrest of a rickshaw driver, father of four, ignored that a child was now dead, and on his watch. No further updates were proffered on the whereabouts of 11-year-old Samra, also missing at the same time, or of the seven-year-old boy whose decomposed body had recently been fished out of the sewers. No one knows if any more rapists are on the loose or if anyone is even looking for the missing child or the killer.

The truth is no state agency can tell you how many children are missing or abused in Karachi, or anywhere in the rest of the country. This job is conveniently left to NGOs that maintain databases, publish reports and offer limited response mechanisms. The Sindh Child Protection Authority Act, recently amended, mandates the protection of missing and street children. The reality is that the shelter it runs in Korangi is empty and its chairperson is reportedly known more for sanctioning funds for vehicles than results.

Despite posters advertising NGO-run helplines, clearly displayed around three of the (unmanned) women and child police desks in Karachi that we visited last year — a scheme of the previous IG — policemen on duty were compl­etely unaware of them. Unclai­med children brought in by concerned ci­­tizens, I was told, are sent to Edhi. Orders were issued by AIG Sindh to report all missing children to CPLC’s much-lauded Zainab Alert App (no link to one of the same name run by the PM’s Citizen Portal; neither actually issues public alerts) but Maham’s was not, and most missing child cases slip under its radar entirely.

The state’s job of protecting missing children, often viewed by those in charge as impossible as climbing the Karakoram, is actually quite simple. To start, it is to make ZARRA functional; to appoint a robust DG, one who actually wants to perform. Data received and digitally recorded in one place facilitates oversight. The technology is available, the training of responders possible.

Only when the state removes the stones from its heart and births systems and a resolve as strong as a rock can we hope to offer Pakistan’s child victims what we fail to give all: a future. One in which big hearts and little hands, like Marwa’s, wave green and white flags, with its star firmly ensconced in the cradle of its crescent.

*The writer is an award-wining journalist and heads a citizen’s advocacy group for child protection, Kasur Hamara Hai.*

*Published in Dawn, August 12th, 2021*