**[Who to blame?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1642106/who-to-blame)**

[Kishwar Enam](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8534/kishwar-enam)Published August 23, 2021 - Updated 2 days ago

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The writer is a paediatrician at the Aga Khan University Hospital.

WAKING up nearly every day to a new case of child abuse, violence and murder makes one wonder: who is to blame? Maybe it is my paediatric community that has been unable to guide parents, or maybe it is our society that frowns upon sex education and life skills as one way of bringing down the incidence of rape and murder. Or perhaps it is the parents who think their reputation in the family and community is far more important than the mental health of their child. Or perhaps it is our government for whom the enforcement of laws is never a priority.

Child abuse and domestic violence in Pakistan have plagued our society from the very beginning but such cases have largely been hidden from our eyes. We hear about them more now because of the continuous efforts of child rights activists in the country to raise awareness and the advent of social media. The increase in the number of cases of child abuse is also due to the absence of proper systems to handle these cases, poor law enforcement, court rulings that do not follow policy, no guaranteed punishments for rapists, poverty, unemployment, lack of population control efforts, uninhibited access to inappropriate material via social media, little attention to mental health, no lessons in the curriculum on how to keep physically safe, and finally their taboo nature in a conservative society.

How many more will die before we learn to protect our children?

We do not know when the government will realise it is an emergency. How many more Mahams, Noors, Farishtas and Zainabs will have to lose their lives before we develop a proper child protection system? We must register speedy FIRs and implement fair court judgements besides carrying out exemplary punishments and activating the Zainab Alert law. After the recent case in Karachi of the sexual abuse and murder of six-year-old Maham, police boasted how they had arrested the culprit within 72 hours. In fact, she could have been saved if the matter had been registered and a search team dispatched immediately after the father reported his daughter was missing. Those critical five to six hours when no one tried looking for her decided her fate. The only action taken by the police department was to fire the police officer who gave a tough time to the father. The police department should have passed an order that for future cases FIRs should be registered immediately and search parties sent out promptly by police stations.

Parents must be alert at all times. One cannot emphasise enough that the predator is always nearby and often someone very close to the child. In fact, 80 per cent of the time, the abuser is someone known to the child. Responsible behaviour is the need of the hour and children should not be allowed to leave the house alone under any circumstances. It is not worth the risk. Let’s ask ourselves if we are honest about our role as parents. In a recent case of the sexual abuse of a 13-year-old, I asked the mother how and what her daughter knew about sex. With a casual smile, she replied, that children these days possess smartphones, and they watch (and understand) everything. It is easy to see how parents are ready to abdicate their roles of supervision and guidance and leave it to social media to ‘educate’ the child. At the other end, as a society, we still consider it immoral to talk to our children about this topic in all its aspects.

Parents and the government must also understand that we are in the midst of a mental health crisis. We need to be vigilant, proactive and supportive of our children. They are not only living in a time when the entire world is going through a crisis, we are also living in a country where child rights have no value. If we do not act now, we will not be able to survive the burden of mental health problems in the future.

Educational institutions should step forward to do their bit to safeguard their students. A significant chunk of a child’s day is spent in school and a few impactful lessons can make a huge difference in his or her life. Add safeguarding and life skill lessons to the curriculum. Make child protection committees in schools and pledge to take the responsibility of keeping children safe in schools. Madressahs should also follow these rules. We can only curtail child abuse by taking positive steps, and not by pointing fingers.

Finally, our society needs to know that when we indulge in victim blaming, prevent schools from educating our children about these matters, and do not speak up when abuse is happening in front of our eyes, we are indirectly helping these predators.

Let’s pledge to give our children a safe environment to grow instead of snatching away their precious childhoods in the name of superficial respect and honour.

*The writer is a paediatrician at the Aga Khan University Hospital.*

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