Child Sexual Abuse in Pakistan: Evidence-informed Policy Framework

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Accepted: 30 August 2021 / Published online: 20 September 2021
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Background

Islamic Republic of Pakistan is located in South Asian region where child protection is a recently recognized area of concern (Pulla, 2017). After the 18th amendment in Pakistan’s 1973 constitution and completion of devolution process in 2011, the provinces are responsible for legislation and policy-making regarding protection of children. Despite this devolution of power, provinces lack the capacity for policy-making and mostly adapt or adopt the policies from federal government. More than 39% (80.4 million) of the population of the country comprises of children (UNICEF, 2017). Islamization in Pakistan resulting in increased influence of clerics as interpreters of religious law has been the main barrier to achieving social development and implementation of ideals of human rights in the modern age (Qadeer, 2006). Islamic Ideology Council1 reviews the laws for their compatibility according to their interpretation of religious ethos. Administratively, all the federal and provincial departments of government are headed by elite bureaucracy of British colonial era (Gardezi, 1981). Including human rights and social welfare, Child Protection Departments and all the federal and provincial government departments are headed by this elite bureaucracy. These general administrators do not have professional training or educational background in human rights, social work, social welfare, or social development, and they are transferred from one department to another on top policy and decision-making positions without having the relevant qualification, expertise, or experience required for that post. Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan has gone through several decades of direct military rule and intervention in politics (Cohen, 2011). Security-focused narrative of national policy of Pakistan affects priorities of state for human rights. Socio-economic realities such as poverty is another

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1 A constitutional body that advises government and parliament whether or not a certain law is repugnant to Islam.
important factor which was considered by policy-makers of Pakistan as causing
ground for issues related to child protection (Jabeen & Jabeen, 2016).

Child sexual abuse is widely prevalent but recently recognized as a social prob-
lem in Pakistan. In Pakistan 8 cases of child sexual abuse were reported per day in
media during the year 2019 (Sahil, 2019). However, reported cases of child sexual
abuse in Pakistan are a tip of an iceberg. According to the findings of a retrospective
study (Abbas & Jabeen, 2020) on prevalence of child abuse in Pakistan, 41% (44%
males and 39% females) of the respondents reported that they faced at least one form
(looking at private parts, pornography, touching private parts, speaking in sexual
way and/or penetrative sex) of sexual abuse during childhood. Findings of the same
study revealed that the highest reported perpetrators of child sexual abuse were the
people known to the child (including peers, relatives, and neighbors).

Purpose of this study is to critically analyze the current policy response to the
issue of child sexual abuse in Pakistan and propose an evidence-informed policy
framework based on best practices in the field of child protection. This paper has
seven main parts. First part is about introduction of Pakistan, second part provides
brief overview of the best approaches and emerging orientations in the field of child
protection, third part critically analyzes the current child protection policy and prac-
tice focus in Pakistan, fourth part is about the methodology of the paper, fifth part
contains data analysis, evidence-informed policy framework for Pakistan is pro-
posed in the sixth part, and in seventh part impediments to policy implementation
along with recommendations are mentioned briefly.

Emerging Orientations in the Field of Child Protection

Child rights are emerging frame of reference and commitment for social work prac-
tice (Roose & De Bie, 2008). The four basic principles of United Nations Convention
on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are non-discrimination, best interests of
the child, rights to survival and development, and views of the child (UNICEF,
1989). Newly emerged child-centered orientation focuses on the broader welfare and
development of child as an individual having all rights rather than narrowly focus-
ing on risks and harms to the child (Gilbert et al., 2011). There is growing trend to
exercise the child protection models on the basis of community development process
(Gardner, 2003; Hudson, 1999; Lonne et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2006; Wright, 2004;
Young et al., 2014). United Nations Committee on the Rights of Child in point 31 of
General Comment 7 on United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child recom-
mended the home and community-based programs for education and empowerment
of parents and guardians (UNICEF, 2006). According to the process of community
development, the local community can be engaged for recognizing the problem,
identifying the strategies for its solution, decision-making for implementation, and
capacity building of the community for protection of children (Wright, 2004). This
method of community development can be further used to mobilize informal net-
works for support regarding protection of children (Lonne et al., 2021). Indigenous
culture must be considered while formulating the policy regarding protection of
children (Parton, 2020). Gathering of research data about various risk and protective
factors of the problem is the first response to the issue of child sexual abuse (Radford et al., 2016). In point 39 of general comment 7 on United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child, United Nations Committee on the Rights of Child urges the state parties to collect data and develop indicators on all aspects of childhood for implementation of policy and assessment of its progress (UNICEF, 2006).

Evidence suggests that counseling and therapeutic services for survivors can reduce the effects of traumatic experience of sexual abuse including the disclosure of child sexual abuse (World Health Organization, 2016). Training of professionals within various agencies providing the services to children is very important. All the professionals working directly or indirectly with children including healthcare workers, child protection professionals, police, law enforcement officials, civil servants, prosecutors, lawyers, social workers, prison officials, judges, teachers, parliamentarians, and all those serving at any position in human rights or child rights organizations should be regularly trained about child rights and their protection as knowledge and skills related to child protection are not static (UNICEF, 2006).

Current Child Protection Policy and Practice Focus in Pakistan

In Pakistan policy response to sexual abuse cases is incidents based and not strategic (Abbas & Jabeen, 2021; Jabeen, 2013). As a response to the media-highlighted issue of rape and murder of 6-year-old girl child Zainab in district Kasur of Punjab province, the legislation “Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act, 2020” was introduced to raise alert for response and recovery of missing and abducted children. Issue of child sexual abuse should have been addressed in broader way about protection of children from sexual abuse as well. Although it is important to raise alert but this new legislation was overwhelmed by stranger danger and kidnapping of children by “bad people” and prevention of child sexual abuse is not addressed in statutory or non-statutory response. The perpetrator Imran Ali killed the child Zainab after raping her. He was well known to the child because of frequently visiting her parents. He found the child going alone for Quran reciting class and exploited the trust of child and tool her away to an under construction building site where he killed the child by strangulation, after raping her. The perpetrator was convicted and hanged after his identification through DNA test.

Recently, another case was highlighted by media in which a woman was raped in front of her two children in Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab province. As a response to this incident, Anti-Rape (Investigation & Trial) ordinance, 2020, and Pakistan Penal Code (Amendment) were legislated. These legislations are applicable in the cases of adult and child victims of sexual abuse as well. This legislation provided the ground for establishing reporting mechanism, anti-rape crisis cells within public hospitals, special courts, and prompt registration of cases. Strangely, these anti-rape crisis cells will be headed by Deputy Commissioners (a senior officer of elite bureaucracy) of the respective districts, instead of appointing a dedicated professional with appropriate experience and qualification required for addressing such issues. Moreover, the need for providing psychological support to the victims by recruiting qualified mental health professionals is
ignored in the legislation. Similarly, the need for a case manager with appropriate qualification in professional social work is completely ignored in this legislation. The role of a professional social worker is crucial for overall management of cases and assessing the needs of victims and referral to relevant services accordingly. Provision of chemical castration in recent legislation is questionable for effectiveness, ethical issues, and human rights concerns (Stinneford, 2005). Legislation of chemical castration and death punishment of offenders are contrary to the principles of human rights. It is against the article 7 of United Nation’s International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which prohibits subjecting anyone to inhuman or degrading punishment. Similarly, article 16 of UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) ratified by Pakistan prohibits any inhuman or degrading punishment. This new legislation is against the spirit of the constitution of Pakistan (article 14) which states that dignity of a person is inviolable. These legislative measures are more perpetrators focused and aimed at punishing the rapist only rather than protecting the vulnerable.

Policies related to protection of children in Pakistan are influenced by populist beliefs and practices about who should be considered the child and how the children should be treated (NCCWD & UNICEF, 2008). Child protection policy in Pakistan tends to address manifestation (child labor, harmful cultural practices, children without guardian, juvenile offenders, and sexual exploitation of children) rather than structural factors of child abuse (respect for human rights, democracy, rule of law, poverty and culture) prevention (UNICEF, 2004). UNICEF (2004) further identified the issues in will and capacity of government, harmonization of national and international laws, inter-departmental coordination, broader awareness, capacity building of children for self-protection, initiating open debate in the community about protection of children, and monitoring and reporting mechanism of child abuse.

Pakistan was rocked by reporting of high profile cases of child sexual abuse, especially in district Kasur of Punjab province, and in recent years, a trend was observed about increased coverage of the issue in the media as it can be noticed in reports compiled by a non-governmental organization (Sahil, 2017, 2018). This increased reporting was perceived as increased incidence as a new phenomenon. The recent recognition of child sexual abuse in media was mostly reactionary, fearful (“Fears of serial child killer”, 2018) and with a moral panic rather than proactive and rational approach. Media charged the masses with anger, fear, insecurity, and stranger danger among the masses which resulted in public demand for harsh punishment for the child sexual abusers. Harsh sentences create false sense of security among the people (Levenson et al., 2007). Media reporting of child sexual abuse also pivoted mostly around the criminal justice system response to issue of child sexual abuse and broader social context and etiology of child sexual abuse about its causes, associated factors and prevention were not discussed in media in broader social context of Pakistan (Abbas & Jabeen, 2021). In Pakistan, policy response to violation of children’s rights is issue-to-issue based and not strategic. This response tends to address manifestations of child abuse rather than its root cause, e.g., narrow mandate of Child...
Protection and Welfare Bureau provided by Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act, 2004 (Jabeen, 2013).

A recent study revealed that in Pakistan media sensationalized the issue of child sexual abuse and Pakistan’s policy response to issue of child sexual abuse tended to address punitive public demands of hanging the rapists rather than addressing the issue in evidence-informed approach. It is established in the same study that inappropriate media reporting has been a serious issue and instead of discussing broader social context and preventive measures of child sexual abuse, media discussed only punitive aspects and criminal justice system response to the issue of child sexual abuse. Debates and resolutions on this issue in parliament of Pakistan also pivoted around strict punitive responses and even public hanging of the rapists (Hussain, February 7, 2020; Raza, July 31, 2021). Lonne and Parton (2014) maintained that the way media portrays the issue of child abuse greatly influences the policy and practice of child protection.

Methods

Respondents of this study were equal number of male and female 18–24 years old 274 university students of BS Social Sciences program recruited through random sampling. Participants were asked retrospectively about their unwanted sexual experiences during their childhood before attaining the age of 18 years. Approval for the study design was taken from Social Work Department, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Moreover, study design and purpose were discussed with Heads of Departments of University where participants were studying and formal permission for conducting the study was granted by all except one Head of Department. Students were also briefed about the purpose of the study and their consent was sought. Participants were told that they can withdraw from study at any stage. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were ensured. Recalling the memories of adverse experiences of childhood could be traumatic, and as a strategy to cope such issue, participants of the study were informed about available free mental health support in Pakistan, if needed. Internationally standardized tool ICAST-R (International Child Abuse and Neglect Screening Tool-Retrospective) was used for asking about their experience of sexual abuse, disclosure patterns, gap in incident of abuse and disclosure, neglect, and socio-economic status of family during childhood. Child rights framework, community development, and evidence-informed policy approach was proposed after critical review to formulate a strategic and holistic framework for addressing preventive and curative aspects of child sexual abuse in Pakistan.

There is serious scarcity of data on prevalence and other aspects of child sexual abuse in Pakistan. Before discussion on policy response to the issue of child sexual abuse, it was important to know about the population of children affected by this serious social problem and various other aspects related to this issue. Scarcity of data makes it very challenging to analyze the policy and suggest reforms.
Therefore, data collected for this purpose was included in the paper for estimate of prevalence of child sexual abuse and other factors.

**Data Analysis**

**Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse (Table 1)**

As shown in Table 1, touching of private parts was the highest reported sub-forms of CSA reported by 27.37% (23.35% males and 31.38% females) respondents out of 274 respondents. Looking at private parts was the second highest reported sub-form of CSA reported by 25.91% respondents (27% males and 24.81% females). Penetrative sex was reported by 8.39% respondents (10.94% males and 5.83% females).

**Timing of Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse (Table 2)**

Table 2 illustrates that among the 274 participants of study, 41.60% were abused with at least one form of sexual abuse. Majority of abused children (65.78%) never disclosed abuse to anyone and only 34.21% victims disclosed their experience of sexual abuse to someone. Out of the 34.21% victims of child sexual abuse who disclosed their experience to someone, only 12.82% disclosed the experience of sexual abuse within a day of abuse and highest number of respondents (28.20%) reported the experience of sexual abuse after 3 or more years.
Pattern of Disclosure to Someone (Table 3)

Table 3 presents that majority of the victims (50.98%) reported experience of child sexual abuse to their friends/peer, followed by parents (11.76%) and siblings (7.84%). Extremely low number of victims disclosed experience of sexual abuse to a doctor (3.92%), police (1.96%), or a counselor/social worker (1.96%).

Child Neglect (Table 4)

Table 4 is about prevalence of child neglect as reported by respondents. “Injured when no adult supervising” was the highest reported form of neglect reported by 23.72% respondents (21.89% males and 25.54% females). Second highest sub-form of neglect was “not taken care when sick or injured” reported by 21.89% respondents (24.08% males and 19.70% females).

Socio-economic Status of Respondents (Table 5)

As shown in Table 5 households of 22.26% respondents were unable to pay the utility bills and utility services of 20.43% were stopped for not paying the bills.
Evidence-Informed Policy Response for Addressing the Problem of Child Sexual Abuse

On the basis of primary data of this study, literature review, and analysis of current policy response, it was identified that child sexual abuse is widely prevalent but goes undisclosed and unreported. Only a very small number of respondents reported child sexual abuse to authorities. Supervisory and other forms of neglect were also found prevalent among the respondents of the study. It was also found that households of the respondents were struggling with serious economic challenges and even faced difficulties for paying their utility bills. Other serious issues identified at policy level were inappropriate media coverage of child sexual abuse issue, lower conviction rate in child sexual abuse cases, poor management of reported cases, and punitive policy and legislation. However, it should be noted that in this sample, diversity of the population was not taken into account due to time and resource constraints. Therefore, this data should be considered an example to build on the broader evidence base for creating a holistic policy response. Some emerging orientations for good policy response are illustrated below for addressing the issue of child sexual abuse.

Research and Evidence-Informed Policy and Legislation

A causal theory which is valid and adequate about linkages of intervention with attainment of objectives is important for a sound policy (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1983). Pakistan’s current policy framework failed to respond by establishing causal linkage between manifestations and root cause of child abuse in Pakistan (Jabeen, 2013). For the successful implementation of a policy, tractability of the problem is very important which is provided by the causal theory (Sabatier and Mazamanian, 1983). Poor and incoherent understanding of the issue of child sexual abuse can hamper the capacity of law for prosecution of crime and protection of children (Mathew & Collin-Vézina, 2019). Scarcity of data on the issue of child abuse was identified, and it was also observed that most of the available information was limited to the reported cases of child sexual abuse (Abbas & Jabeen, 2020). Identification of the problem of child sexual abuse and its explanation in broader social context are vital for formulation of an effective policy. In recent times growing research tendency and increasing knowledge body for understanding the problem of child sexual abuse was observed. There are reputed specialized journals publishing research on this issue. In countries like the USA and Canada, incidence studies were conducted to understand this serious issue to devise solution (Sedalk et al., 2010; Trocmé et al., 2001).

Table 5 Socio-economic status of respondents (%age (N=274))

| Status of household utility bills | % |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Not paid utility bills           | 22.26 |
| Utility services stopped because non-payment | 20.43 |

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Data of this study revealed (Table 1) widely prevalent various forms of child sexual abuse (touching of private parts, looking at private parts, sexual talk, making sexual video, and penetrative sex). It was also evident in the above stated literature and data that majority of the incidents of child sexual abuse were undisclosed and unreported (Table 3). According to the findings of this study, more male respondents disclosed the experiences of child sexual abuse than females. This is contrary to the findings of studies conducted in other countries (Finkelhore et al., 2014; Barth et al., 2013; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011) which reported the higher prevalence of sexual abuse among females than males. Another study on prevalence of child sexual abuse conducted in a South Asian country (India) also reported higher prevalence among the males than females (Kumar et al., 2019). This could be because of decreased exposure of girls due to strict social restriction on pre-marital sex, over protective behavior with girls, and strict concept of female virginity (de Silva, 2007) in South Asian culture, or it could be because of lower disclosure rate by the female respondents due to strong stigma associated with sexual abuse. Prevalence of child sexual abuse is far higher than the reported cases. Moreover, perpetrators were mostly known faces who exploited trust rather than using power for sexually abusing the child, and peers were the highest reported perpetrators of child sexual abuse followed by close relatives, neighbors, and teachers according to a study on prevalence of child abuse in Pakistan (Abbas & Jabeen, 2021). It is really challenging to protect the children from such non-threatening perpetrators who abuse them within an intimate environment.

There is a need to shift the policy focus from pursuing punitive public demands to considering evidence for legislation. There is increasing trend of taking assistance from policy labs for legislation and policy making (Fuller & Lochard, 2016; Tönuristet et al., 2017; Olejniczak et al., 2020) in some other countries. Following this trend, federal and provincial governments in Pakistan may establish policy labs by recruiting the researchers for assisting the parliament and related institutions for evidence-informed policy-making and legislation. Based on research, diversity of population and issues related to vulnerable groups of children such as the children who are institutionalized, living in Madrassas, with special needs, on the street, working as labor, neglected, from broken families, living in unsafe neighborhood, and other such groups of children should be taken into account while designing policy response. In Pakistan, there is no single institution dedicated for providing training at federal or provincial level to officials and professionals working with children. Such training institutions should be established within relevant human rights or social welfare ministries for providing multi-disciplinary and specialized training to professionals working with children. Special courses for parliamentarians and officials involved in policy and legislation related to children can also be designed and imparted. These institutions should work in collaboration with policy labs proposed above. Such institutions can play important role for improving policy and legislation, spreading broader awareness, effective management of cases, and improving the process of prosecution by training of key actors in criminal justice system.
Pakistan signed and ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In point 29 and 38 of general comment 5 and 7, respectively, on UNCRC, International Committee on Child Rights urged the state parties to devise and implement a strategic plan based on child rights framework with a clear timeline (UNICEF, 2006). UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989) is helpful for providing the framework for protection of children from sexual abuse, taking stakeholders (children, families, and communities) on board, supporting families, engaging communities, and respecting cultural tradition and any arrangement by governments for ensuring the availability of rights to children. Article 1 of the UNCRC recognizes the child as an individual having all the rights in convention, and article 3 emphasizes to secure best interests of the child. Similarly, new emerging child-centered approach in the field of child protection requires that rather than risk and harm, the center of focus should be the welfare and development of child as an individual, having independent contract with state (Gilbert et al., 2011). Article 4 requires the governments to ensure availability of rights to children as mentioned in UNCRC, and article 6 is about ensuring survival and development of children. Article 12 of the UNCRC states that adult should take the opinion of the children into account while making decision affecting them. Articles 26 and 27 require the government to financially support the families for maintaining standards of living good enough to fulfill the physical and psychological needs of children. Article 34 of the convention clearly illustrates that governments should protect the children from sexual abuse. Article 39 further recommends special measures for rehabilitation of the children who are neglected or abused. While at one point UNCRC emphasizes to ensure the rights of children to their cultural identity (Article 8 and 30), it also emphasizes to protect the children from any harmful cultural practice (Article 30) or any other activity harmful for their development (Article 32 and 36).

Federal and provincial governments in Pakistan should ensure that the best interests of the child should be the focus of policy and legislation while addressing the issue of child sexual abuse. Furthermore, the legislation should not contradict the rights of a person recognized in constitution of Pakistan and international conventions signed or ratified by Pakistan.

Community-Based Networking for Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse

People are capable of changing their personal and family lives, and collective positive action by community can be very helpful for protecting the children (Young et al., 2014). Goldman et al. (2003) advised implementation of a four-stage prevention program. Public awareness activities, parent education programs, skills based curricula for children, and home visitation are the four stages of proposed prevention strategy. Finkelhore and Dziuba-Leatherman (1995) also recommend similar child sexual abuse prevention measures of targeting parents, teachers, community, and especially children directly, usually in school setting through such program. In essence CSA prevention programs with children serve three major functions: (i)
demarcating sexual abuse to enable children identify good and bad touch, (ii) creating resilience in children, and (iii) encouraging them to report if something uncomfortable happens to them (Sanderson, 2004). Family connectedness with adult supervision was identified by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) as vital to protect children from abuse by providing shielding effects to both preschool and school-going children. Community development approach is helpful for mobilizing informal network regarding protection of children (Lonne et al., 2021). Community-based child protection committees and networks can be engaged for a range of benefits such as identifying the risks to children, identifying resources and services to support children and families, referring them to available services, generating debate in community about child protection issues, and ensuring participation of children in decision making process related to various child protection measures (Child Frontiers, 2012). Federal and provincial governments’ institutions in Pakistan related to protection and rights of children may initiate community-based child protection networks in collaboration with civil society organizations.

Reforming Response in Reported Cases of Child Sexual Abuse

From incidence to reporting and trial, there are three main issues regarding response to the issue of child sexual abuse: (i) extremely low disclosure and reporting rate due to stigma, (ii) extremely low conviction rates and punitive policy responses, and (iii) extremely low number of respondents reporting experience of sexual abuse to police, doctor, or social worker (Table 3) according to the findings of current study. Issue of extremely low conviction rate of sex crimes in Pakistan (Gishkori, 2020) was raised in the findings of the report submitted by the investigation committee on child sexual abuse incidents in district Kasur of Punjab Province (Federal Ombudsman & National Commission for Children, 2019). Low rates of conviction could be due to poor case management, delayed reporting, lack of evidence (Mustafa & Mehmood, 2015), and reconciliation before conclusion of cases by protecting the abuser (Jabeen, 2016; Mustafa & Mehmood, 2015). Majority of child sexual abuse perpetrators were acquitted in Pakistan due to poor investigation (Khan, 2020) and lack of evidence (Bilal, 2018; Zehra, 2019). An effective policy response regarding child sexual abuse requires coordination and cooperation among various institutions such as schools, healthcare, police, child protection, and judiciary in holistic manners (Save the Children Norway, 2005). In Pakistan doctors conducting the medico-legal are neither specifically trained for this purpose nor they are pediatricians having any training for managing child sexual abuse cases. Nurse and persons assisting the doctors during the medico-legal process are not trained for this purpose. No counseling or mental health support is provided in hospitals to sexually abused children in reported and disclosed cases of sexual abuse. Psychologists or psychiatrists are not involved in hospital or at any stage during case process. It is important to note that even professional social workers are not involved during the entire case process.

Multi-disciplinary team of appropriately trained professionals (Social workers, doctors, nurses, mental health professionals, lawyers and police personnel) at a child
friendly facility should be considered by federal and provincial governments as a practice model in reported cases of child sexual abuse. This model will be effective for improved evidence quality, better prosecution rate, involvement of minimum professionals, collaborative effectiveness among various professionals, reduction in number of interviews to protect child from repeated recalling of traumatic memories, better performance by agencies, and efficient use of limited resources (Scribano & Giardino, 2009). Federal and provincial governments should immediately recruit and involve trained professional social workers and mental health professionals to facilitate the victims in reported cases of child sexual abuse in healthcare settings. Rather than legislation for harsher punishment, there is a need to address above discussed issues so as to facilitate the victims and ensure punishment to perpetrators in child sexual abuse cases.

**Challenges and Impediments to implementation of Policy**

**Social, Cultural, Structural, and Administrative Challenges**

Social and cultural factors are very important to consider while formulating the policy for protection of children. Child protection policies are not simply the responses to the problem of child abuse, but these policies are greatly influenced by the social, cultural, and political environment of the country (Parton, 2020). Inclusion of social, economic, and political realities while formulating and implementing the policy increases its effectiveness (Bhuyan et al., 2010). On the basis of social norms, the violence in a society is justified and sustained (Bicchieri, 2005). According to their unique cultural, economic, and human infrastructural realities, the nations should formulate their action plans (Finkelhore & Korbin, 1988). As it is shown in research data (Table 1), different forms of child sexual abuse were found significantly prevalent, but experience of child sexual abuse was disclosed by majority of victims to peer and small number of victims disclosed experience of abuse to their guardians (Table 3).

It was also evident in the above narrated findings that child sexual abuse was disclosed by the respondents with delay or never disclosed (Table 2) in majority of the incidents. Delayed reporting of child sexual abuse has serious implications regarding safety of children, legal proceedings, and therapy of victims (Cashmore et al., 2016; McElvaney, 2013). Overall, delayed disclosure negatively affects the criminal justice outcome of reported cases (McElvaney, 2013). The reluctance to disclose the experience of child sexual abuse could be due to the taboo and stigma around this issue and lack of social support (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015). It was revealed in a UNICEF study that establishing Family Support Units with trained female professionals established by Sierra Leone special police proved helpful in fighting against stigma associated with sexual abuse, and rise in reported cases was observed after this intervention (Bastik et al., 2007).

Properly trained officials of ministries of human rights, child protection institutions, and social welfare department in collaboration with civil society organizations and media should launch community level awareness programs about positive
parenting and protection of children in the community. Such programs should be led by the experts of the field.

**Socio-economic Challenges**

Among the respondents of study households of 22.6% respondents did not pay their utility bills and utility services of 20.43% were stopped because of non-payment (Table 5). Poverty is one of the important issues increasing risk factor of child sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1984). Poverty affects the ability of individuals and communities regarding protection from abuse due to increased risk and vulnerability to abuse (Jabeen, 2016). A study (Jabeen, 2014) on the reported cases of child sexual abuse in Pakistan revealed that children with poor and lower middle socio-economic backgrounds are more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Poverty stricken social fabric, weak civil authority, lack of empowerment, and being with disadvantage ethnic identity are also factors associated with child sexual abuse in South Asian community (Frederick, 2010). According to a meta-analysis study (Ligiero et al., 2019), cash transfers and micro-financing with mentoring proved effective for socio-economic rehabilitation to address the risk factor of child sexual abuse because of economic reason. General comment 7 on UNCRC recognized the poverty as a factor threatening the survival and undermining the basic quality of life of the children and families (UNICEF, 2006). In the same comment, it was recommended to take all measures such as support programs and social security for rehabilitation of the families affected by poverty to provide basic standards of living consistent with the rights of children. Government should launch a national poverty reduction program to pull the children and families out of extreme poverty.

**Limitations**

This study has limitations and should be considered a part of a gradually building evidence base for policy framework. It will be important to conduct a comprehensive study with larger sample for designing an evidence-informed policy response at provincial or national level by keeping the diversity of population in mind. Comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data on various aspects of child sexual abuse should be collected for this purpose.

**Conclusion**

Current policy response to the issue of child sexual abuse is not consistent with the ideals of human rights and framework of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC). Policy and legislation is not holistic, strategic, and right-based but populist, incident-based, and punitive. This is contrary to good policy practices, against the spirit of other conventions ratified and with the constitution of Pakistan. There is a need to harmonize national laws of Pakistan with
the international law. The policy for addressing the problem of child sexual abuse should be consistent with the framework of child rights according to UNCRC and based on comprehensive qualitative and quantitative data related to various important aspects of the problem. Majority of the perpetrators according to the findings of this study were well known to the children, and peers were also among the highest reported perpetrators. Available literature reveals that majority of the child sexual abuse incidents were not disclosed or disclosed with delay and there was extremely low level of conviction in reported cases of child sexual abuse due to various issues. Broader awareness, initiating debate on the issue of child sexual abuse through media and measures to address the stigma around the topic of sexuality, can be helpful for addressing the problem. On the principles of community development, community, families, and children should be engaged for identification and solution of problem. Moreover, community should be reached for awareness and education about child sexual abuse prevention. Socio-economic rehabilitation of the families through especially designed programs should be used as tool for decreasing the vulnerability of children at risk of abuse.

Public opinion influences the direction and outcome of child protection policy. Therefore, it is important to address the issues in the current public opinion about problem of child sexual abuse through media by engaging experts with research and practice background in the field of child protection. Policy and legislative response to the issue of child sexual abuse should be evidence-informed. Main issue with the criminal justice system outcome in reported cases of child sexual abuse is not lack of strict punishment but extremely low conviction rates due to multiple factors including poor case management, untrained professionals handling the cases, reconciliation, and tolerance of abuse. These factors should be addressed as discussed above. Professionals such as healthcare workers, police, law enforcement officials, civil servants, prosecutors, lawyers, social workers, prison officials, judges, teachers, parliamentarians, and all those serving at any position in human rights or child rights should be well trained about child rights and child protection.

**Funding** This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Declarations**

**Competing Interests** The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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