



THE DIGITAL THREAT UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The research investigates the increasing incidence of online child sexual abuse (OCSA) in Pakistan, highlighting its diverse manifestations, demographic trends, and the legal and procedural gaps. By integrating insights from NGOs, government frameworks, and technological interventions, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how digital platforms facilitate abuse. The findings emphasize the need for reforms in legal frameworks and international collaborations to curb the transnational nature of the crime.

Recommendations include enhancing law enforcement capabilities, increasing public awareness, and implementing technology-driven safeguards to protect children.

1. Introduction

The Research delves into the intricate and diverse manifestations of online child sexual abuse (CSA). In an era characterized by pervasive technological advancements and increasing internet penetration, the vulnerabilities of children to a spectrum of exploitative behaviours in the digital realm have become more pronounced. The research sheds light on the multifaceted nature of online CSA, particularly within the context of Pakistan. Due to enhanced internet utility among children, there is a pressing need to address the associated risks and challenges. The insidious grooming tactics employed by predators to the dissemination of explicit material through various online mediums, the complexities of online CSA demand a comprehensive understanding. Moreover, the interconnected nature of the digital world transcends geographical boundaries, presenting unique challenges for law enforcement and policymakers. Against this backdrop, it is imperative to unravel the intricate dynamics of online CSA to develop targeted interventions and protective measures tailored to the specific needs of children in Pakistan.

1.1 Research Objective

- How can technology complement legal approaches in combating online abuse?
- How do NGOs contribute to addressing online abuse in Pakistan?
- What are the trends in abuse cases among children aged six to 15 in Pakistan?
- What comprehensive approaches are needed to protect children from online abuse in Pakistan?
- What are the diverse manifestations of online child sexual abuse in Pakistan?
- How has digital expansion facilitated online abuse and its associated risks?
- What challenges do law enforcement face in addressing online abuse across borders?
- How can understanding online abuse dynamics inform tailored interventions?

1.2 Online Child Sexual Abuse: Diverse Manifestations

One significant aspect is the emergence of online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA), which includes a range of offenses perpetrated through online platforms. This includes the creation and dissemination of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), commonly known as child pornography. The term "child sexual abuse material" emphasizes the severity of the crime and the harm inflicted on child victims, shifting away from the misleading characterization of "child pornography."

OCSEA takes various forms, each presenting unique challenges and risks for children. Cyberbullying, sexting, sextortion, livestreaming of child sexual abuse, and grooming for sexual purposes are among the alarming trends observed. These activities often involve a power imbalance, coercion, manipulation, or deceit to exploit children for sexual acts or material gain.

The use of advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) introduces new threats, such as deepfake technology. Perpetrators manipulate images and videos to create explicit content, further endangering children and increasing the difficulty of detection. Additionally, the rise of apps and websites employing AI for generating explicit content, known as "Nude Generator Technologies" or "Declothing Apps," poses additional risks and challenges.

A notable case that exemplifies the severity of online child sexual abuse is the "Kasur child sexual abuse scandal" in Pakistan. This series of cases, occurring between 2006 and 2014, revealed an organized crime ring involved in sexually exploiting children, selling abusive material to porn sites, and blackmailing victims' relatives.

Efforts to address online child protection in Pakistan face challenges due to limited awareness, gender-biased social norms, and the evolving nature of technology. The Situation Analysis of Child Online Protection in Pakistan provides insights into the current ecosystem, emphasizing the need for comprehensive legal frameworks, technological solutions, and awareness campaigns to safeguard children in the digital age (NCRC, 2017).

1.3 Insights from NGOs and Tech Interventions

In Pakistan, the legal landscape underscores a commitment to equality before the law for all citizens, with a specific focus on safeguarding children's rights. Enshrined in Article 25(1) of the Pakistani Constitution and Article 37(a) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, these constitutional provisions and international commitments provide a foundational framework. Addressing the heightened risk of child sexual abuse, technological interventions have emerged as a crucial component of the response. Notably, video-based curricula have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing learning outcomes for primary schoolchildren.

Concurrently, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups have played a pivotal role in confronting the escalating crisis of child sexual abuse in the country. Sahil, in particular, has emerged as a prominent example, actively compiling comprehensive data that sheds light on the urgent need for intervention and advocacy (Razzaq, Siddiqui, Ashfaq, & Ashfaq, 2023).

Case of Child sexual abuse reported by Sahil, a non-governmental organisation are 145 (3.76%) in 2021 and 109 cases (2.56%) in 2022 of OCSEA²⁴. In 2021, the Digital Rights Foundation's Cyber Harassment Helpline received 4441 new cases. Children were targeted in 184 cases (4%). The helpline found that females are generally more vulnerable to extortion and non-consensual use of their information, including but not limited to their pictures, videos, and phone numbers. However, fake profiles and hacked accounts are more likely to have a negative emotional impact on women and damage their reputation in society. This is one of the reasons

why few cases are reported to law enforcement in Pakistan. <https://ncrc.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/situation-analysis-of-Child-Online-Protection.pdf>

Roshni Helpline is a non-profit organisation that specialises in recovering missing children and reuniting them with their families. The Roshni team informed the NCRC in November 2022 that while interviewing a number of children after their recovery, they found that some of the children were provoked and manipulated by criminals through chat groups (such as Whatsapp and Messenger) and classified ads websites such as (Locanto). In one case, a girl was sexually abused and ended up in a massage parlour from where she was recovered. (<https://ncrc.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/situation-analysis-of-Child-Online-Protection.pdf>)

The data underscores a concerning trend of abuse cases among children aged six to 15, emphasizing the necessity for improved data collection to gain a comprehensive understanding of the problem's extent across all regions. As Pakistan grapples with this pressing issue, a multifaceted approach that integrates legal, technological, and NGO-driven initiatives becomes imperative to protect the rights and well-being of its young population.

1.4 Understanding Modes of Online CSA

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a pervasive issue involving the coercion or enticement of a child under the age of 18 into sexual activities, irrespective of the child's awareness. This encompasses a spectrum of activities, including involving children in the production or viewing of sexual images, encouraging inappropriate behavior, watching sexual activities, and grooming children for subsequent abuse.

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) represents a specific form of CSA, wherein individuals or groups exploit power imbalances to manipulate, deceive, or coerce a child into sexual activities. This exploitation may occur in exchange for something the victim needs or wants or for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. Importantly, the apparent consensuality of the activity does not negate the possibility of the victim being sexually exploited.

Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) serves as a comprehensive term encompassing a range of offenses. Various modes of Online CSAE Offending include:

1. Online Grooming:
 - Involves developing relationships with children to facilitate abuse, both online and offline, utilizing platforms such as social media, messaging, and live streaming.
2. Live Streaming:
3. Child Sex Offenders (CSOs) utilize live streaming services to incite victims to commit or watch sexual acts via webcam. This may involve streaming live contact sexual abuse or indecent images of children, sometimes with the involvement of other offenders.
4. Online Coercion and Blackmail:
 - The coercion or blackmail of a child through technological means, using sexual images or videos depicting the child, for purposes such as sexual gain, financial gain, or other personal gain.
5. Possession, Production, and Sharing of IIOC (Indecent Images of Children) and Prohibited Images:
 - CSOs leverage online platforms to store, share, and produce IIOC and prohibited images. Online platforms also facilitate the production of IIOC, including screen-recording of child sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated over live streaming.

6. Indecent Images of Children (IIOC):

- Include images judged to breach recognized standards of propriety, depicting a child engaging in sexual activity or in a sexual manner through posing, actions, clothing, etc. This category encompasses photographs, videos, pseudo-photographs, and tracings.

7. **Prohibited Images of Children:**

- Non-photographic images, such as CGI or cartoons, portraying a child engaging in sexual activity, a sexual act being performed in the presence of a child, or focusing on the child's genital or anal region. Understanding these various modes is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat online CSAE and protect children from exploitation. (**National Crime Agency, 2000**)

Current Situation of Online Child Sexual Abuse and Reported Cases

In Chapter 2, we embark on a comprehensive analysis of the current situation of online child sexual abuse (CSA) and reported cases, delving into demographic trends and regional disparities. By leveraging data from multiple reports, our analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and distribution of online CSA cases.

Our examination begins by scrutinizing demographic trends, which reveal crucial insights into the vulnerable populations affected by online CSA. Through meticulous exploration of available data, we aim to uncover patterns within demographic groups, shedding light on factors such as age, gender, and socio-economic status that may influence vulnerability to online abuse.

Furthermore, our analysis extends to regional disparities, aiming to understand any variations in reported cases across different regions. By mapping the prevalence of online CSA against geographical locations, we seek to identify areas with higher incidences of abuse and explore potential factors contributing to these disparities.

Overall, this chapter seeks to contribute valuable insights into the nuanced landscape of online CSA, laying the foundation for informed strategies and interventions to address this pressing issue. Through rigorous examination of demographic trends and regional disparities, we aim to inform policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and advocacy groups in their efforts to combat online child sexual abuse effectively.

2.1 Demographic Trends in Online Child Sexual Abuse

The data from the study on child abuse in Pakistan reveals critical insights into the demographic trends of child abuse. Here are some key findings:

1. **Geographical Distribution:**

- In 2022, the district of Punjab recorded the highest number of documented cases of child abuse, followed by the district of Sindh.
- This indicates regional disparities in the prevalence of child abuse, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions based on geographic locations.

2. **Age and Gender Vulnerability:**

- The age groups (6-10) and (11-15) are identified as highly vulnerable to child abuse.
- Females are more susceptible to child abuse, constituting 55% of the victims, while 45% were male.

3. **Forms of Child Abuse:**

- The study highlights various forms of child abuse, including sexual abuse, sodomy, rape, attempted abuse, child pornography, homicide following sexual abuse, and incest.
- The horrifying reality of these forms underscores the urgency of addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by children.

4. **Increasing Trend:**

- Child abuse cases in Pakistan witnessed an alarming 11% increase in 2022, indicating a growing trend that requires immediate attention and intervention.

5. Digital Technologies Impact:

- The last two decades have seen the rapid global proliferation of digital technologies, introducing new forms of online dangers.
- This includes the rise of deep fake technology and apps using artificial intelligence to undress children in photos, contributing to the vulnerability of minors to online exploitation (Shah, Ahmed, & Malik, 2023).

2.2 In-Depth Analysis of Online Child Sexual Abuse: Insights from Multiple Reports

The demographic trends in child sexual abuse in Pakistan, as revealed by the provided data, indicate a significant and alarming increase in reported cases. The "Cruel Numbers" report by SAHIL presents a comprehensive analysis of child abuse cases in the country. Here are some key findings:

1. **Overall Increase:** There is a 32% increase in child abuse cases in 2018 compared to the previous year. From January 2018 to June of the same year, the total number of reported cases was 2322, as opposed to 1764 cases during the same period in 2017.

2. **Daily Average:** The average number of reported cases per day rose from nine cases in 2017 to 12 cases in 2018, emphasizing the urgency of addressing this issue.

3. Regional Distribution:

- Punjab reported the highest number of cases, accounting for 65% of all reported cases.
- Sindh reported 25% of the cases.
- Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) had 3% of reported cases.
- Islamabad reported 3% of the cases.
- Baluchistan had 2% of the reported cases.

4. **Gender Distribution:** Out of the total 2322 cases, 1024 cases were related to boys, and 1298 cases involved girls as victims.

The age wise breakdown is mentioned below:

Age	Group	Cases
6	10	532
11 -	15	622
16 -	18	615
Not Specified		692

The findings underscore the severity and urgency of addressing child sexual abuse in Pakistan. The data indicates a need for comprehensive strategies and interventions at various levels, including legal, social, and educational, to safeguard the well-being of children and protect them from exploitation.

The regional distribution highlights the importance of targeted efforts in areas with higher reported cases. Addressing the root causes, such as social, psychological, and cultural factors, is crucial to effectively combatting this issue (Tarar, Naomi, & Khan, 2020).

Certainly, a notable reported case on online child sexual abuse in Pakistan is the Kasur child sexual abuse scandal. This scandal unfolded in Hussain Khanwala village, Kasur District, Punjab, from 2006 to 2014, and it gained significant attention due to the discovery of hundreds of video clips, involving at least 280 children of Hussain Khanwala village in Kasur. In one instance, the father of one of the victims was blackmailed into paying PKR 1.2 million to the abusers, who had threatened to release a video of his son being raped.

On August 8, 2015, a confrontation erupted between villagers from Hussain Khanwala and adjacent areas and law enforcement officers in Dolaywala village along Deepalpur Road. The villagers were protesting the perceived failure of the police to halt the abuse ring operating in the area. As tensions escalated, the police attempted to disperse the crowd led by Mobeen Ahmed, resulting in stone pelting from the protestors. Subsequently, the police responded with tear gas and baton charges, leading to injuries among both police personnel and protestors. Among those injured were DSPs Hassan Farooq Ghuman and Arif Rasheed, Ganda Singh SHO Akmal Kausar, along with several policemen and 15 protestors.

In response to the growing public outcry and allegations of police negligence, the Government of Punjab, through its Law Minister Rana Sanaullah, issued a statement on August 8, 2015. Sanaullah asserted that a government inquiry committee had found no evidence of child sex abuse in the area. He attributed the reports to fabricated claims arising from a land dispute between two parties.

Following continued pressure and public outrage, Chief Minister of Punjab Shehbaz Sharif acted on August 9, 2015. He directed the Punjab Home Department to petition Chief Justice Manzoor Ahmed Malik of the Lahore High Court to initiate a judicial inquiry into the sexual abuse case. However, the Chief Justice rejected the request on the subsequent day, citing ongoing investigations by the Punjab police and dismissing the need for a separate judicial commission (**Kasur Child Sexual Abuse Case, 2024**).

Moreover, it is essential to enhance public awareness and education on child protection, empowering parents and communities to play an active role in preventing and reporting child sexual abuse.

Collaboration between government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities is vital to identify the fundamental causes of abuse in each region and implement preventive measures accordingly. Prevention, education, and assistance are crucial for addressing this pervasive problem and assuring a safer, healthier future for Pakistan's children.

Recommendations:

- The study emphasizes the need for collaboration between government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to combat child maltreatment. United Nations Children Human Rights must be taken into consideration by the local governments to protect the children from every kind of physical, mental, and sexual wrong and relevant incidents should be followed by regular procedure of identifying, reporting, investigating. (Jeney, 2013).
- As per requirements of UNCHR, sufficient measures should be taken by the state parties to promote psychological, psychical recovery and social reintegration of the victim (Jeney, 2013).

A strong system of coordination should be developed between local governments and local and international law enforcement agencies understand trends in online child sexual abuse to abandon online sexual exploitation (EPCAT, 2018)

Non-governmental organizations should also work with internationally recognized children's

rights entities to combat online and offline child abuse. (EPCAT International, 2012).

Support of the parents is an important factor to handle online child sexual abuse, victims face severe psychological distress, negative reactions from parents can further harm them and decrease the chances of recovery (UK Council for Child Internet Safety, 2013)

- Local telecommunication and Information Technology Providers must be bound by Law Enforcement Agencies regarding blockage and reporting of the websites regulating child pornographic content, this can be done by extending regulators' existing mandates (Telecommunication Development Sector, 2012).
- Special training programs and policy briefings should be conducted to understand severity of the issue.
- "Domain Name System over https" can assist in protecting children from online sexual abuse. This system by internet service providers will not only restrict access to child pornographic material, also, it will also help to detect terrorist material, hackers, copyright violations, and others (Carr, 2019).

Measures should be taken to identify the fundamental causes of abuse in each region and implement preventive measures, focusing on prevention, education, and assistance.

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