



RESEARCH PAPER

Legal and Policy Responses to Child Abuse In Pakistan: A Critical Analysis of Current Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This secondary research critically examines Pakistan's legal and policy responses to child abuse, assessing their alignment with international obligations and best practices. Drawing on legislation, institutional reports, and scholarly literature from 2008–2023, the study reviews national legal frameworks, identifies enforcement challenges, compares domestic mechanisms with global models such as Norway's Barnahus and India's POCSO Act, and proposes targeted reforms. Findings reveal that Pakistan has enacted a relatively comprehensive set of child protection laws—including the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016, Juvenile Justice System Act 2018, and Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2019—yet their operationalization remains fragmented, reactive, and inconsistently implemented across provinces. Institutional overlaps, absence of standardized inter-agency protocols, inadequate prevention measures, data deficits, and limited integration of civil society actors hinder effectiveness. The research highlights the need for systemic reforms, including centralized coordination mechanisms, single-window victim services, mandatory reporting laws, community-based prevention programs, and a national child protection information system. By situating Pakistan's experience within global and regional contexts, this study underscores that sustainable child protection requires shifting from reactive, incident-driven interventions toward a prevention-centered, multi-sectoral framework grounded in survivor well-being.

KEYWORDS

Child Abuse, Child Protection Policy, Barnahus Model, POCSO Act, Institutional Fragmentation, Prevention Infrastructure, Victim Services, Legal Reform

Introduction

Child abuse—covering acts of physical harm, sexual exploitation, emotional maltreatment, and deliberate neglect—is widely recognized as a severe infringement on the fundamental rights of children and a critical public health and human rights concern. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) estimates that up to one billion children globally, aged between 2 and 17 years, experience one or more forms of violence each year. The consequences of such abuse are multidimensional, often persisting into adulthood, and include impaired cognitive development, chronic mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, substance misuse, lower educational attainment, and reduced socioeconomic opportunities (Gilbert et al., 2009). In Pakistan, the magnitude of child abuse is compounded by structural and cultural factors that interact in complex ways. Deep-seated patriarchal norms, strict codes of family honor, poverty, and inadequate child welfare systems contribute to an environment where abuse is both underreported and, in some contexts, normalized (Ali & Khan, 2020). Weak institutional capacity within law enforcement agencies, coupled with limited social services, means that even when abuse is detected, and systemic barriers can prevent timely intervention or justice for victims (Khan & Qureshi, 2022).

To a certain extent, the seriousness of the problem is revealed by statistical monitoring of civil society institutions, including Sahil. The Cruel Numbers Report (Sahil, 2023) revealed that there were more than 4,500 reported instances of child sexual abuse

during a single year, which, as it can be estimated, equaled 12 reported cases per day on average. Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus amongst researchers that such figures only reflect the visible portion of the iceberg since they are profoundly underreported (Hussain et al., 2021). In most instances, victims and other members of the family are too often silenced by social stigma, especially where the perpetrators are family members, members of the local community or religious leaders. Such cultural difficulties are further enhanced by the mistrust of police escalations, fear of being exposed, and absence of victim-sensitive court systems (UNICEF, 2020). Remarkably, the abuse does not relate only to the domestic settings. Cases have also been reported within educational institutions, where staff vetting is poor. There is a lack of provision of safeguarding policies, in work surroundings, particularly in the case, where children work in a domestic setting in the informal economy, and religious seminaries where there is little oversight (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Digital exploitation has developed as a principal urgent issue nowadays. The uncontrolled development of internet penetration, with its lack of adequate protection, has resulted in children being exposed to online grooming, sexual abuse, and production and sharing of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). Among the countries where online abuse cases are increasing, Pakistan is identified by a UNICEF (2024) report on Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (OCSEA), such that law enforcement in most cases is not trained and well-versed with the technical skills to track, investigate, and prosecute such crimes effectively.

Pakistan's formal obligations toward child protection began with the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990, which bound the state to ensure protection from "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation" (United Nations, 1989). Following ratification, Pakistan embarked on piecemeal legislative reforms over three decades. The Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) has been amended over time to criminalize sexual abuse, human trafficking, and the production or distribution of child pornography (Government of Pakistan, 2016). The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016 further strengthened penalties for such offences, although it still left certain definitional ambiguities, particularly regarding what constitutes abuse and exploitation (Ali & Khan, 2020). The Juvenile Justice System Act 2018 introduced procedural safeguards for minors in conflict with the law, indirectly offering protection from institutional abuse (Khan & Qureshi, 2022). At the provincial level, the Child Protection Acts enacted in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan established Child Protection Bureaus and laid out formal procedures for intervention in cases of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, aiming to provide both preventive and remedial measures within their respective jurisdictions (National Commission on the Rights of Child, 2021). A watershed moment came after the high-profile murder of Zainab Ansari in 2018, which triggered nationwide protests. The Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act (2019) established the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Agency (ZARRA), intended to issue rapid alerts for missing children, coordinate recovery efforts, and maintain a centralized database. The U.S. AMBER Alert partly inspired the design of the given system. However, its functionality is suboptimal due to a lack of funding and awareness, as well as coordination issues among federal, provincial, and local agencies (Government of Pakistan, 2019).

However, the child protection system is very reactive and fragmented, although there is a comprehensive body of law; laws are often imposed, not as a connected, long-term plan, but usually in response to a high-profile incident that is generated (Ali & Khan, 2020). Weaknesses in institutions can be traced back to the fact that the police often lack special units for child-friendly interviews and evidence gathering, which can endanger the progress of investigations (Human Rights Watch, 2019). There is a weak coordination across ministries, provincial departments, and non-governmental organizations and stakeholders tend to work in silos, lacking information sharing or implementing common strategies (National Commission on the Rights of the Child, 2021). There are also existing gaps in legislation where the existing legal definitions of the relevant concepts still fall short of the

issues of emotional abuse, grooming patterns, and new forms of online exploitation (UNICEF, 2024). Cultural and social barriers also weaken reporting and justice to coming forward since victims and their families are not encouraged to do so due to the fear of reputational losses, considerations of character assassination, and social stigma against reporting, given that many societies accept certain people as authority figures (Hussain et al., 2021). Besides, the available few rehabilitation services for abused children are not adequately funded or accessible to satisfy the demands of abused children, crucially lacking adequate counseling and psychosocial support, and rehabilitation programs in most cases (Ali & Khan, 2020).

In contrast, specific international models offer integrated solutions that could inform reform in Pakistan. The Barnahus (Children's House) model, pioneered in Iceland and adopted across Scandinavia, centralizes all necessary services—law enforcement, medical examinations, forensic interviews, and psychological support—in a single, child-friendly facility. This inhibits the trauma of regularly testifying and encourages investigations to become more efficient (Council of Europe, 2022). The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (UNICEF, 2019) proposed by UNICEF also state that protecting children in conflicts requires preventing rather than merely recovering and restoring programming or operations, early detection of vulnerable children, coordination with other sectors, and effective case management systems. The focus of such frameworks is on data collection, monitoring, and evaluation, which is far from Pakistan due to the country's fragmented data environment. Another example of how specialized, technology-strengthened law enforcement can be used to uproot digital exploitation networks is also available in the efforts of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP) in the United Kingdom, an ability that is yet to be built in Pakistan by the Federal Investigation Agency (UK National Crime Agency, 2023).

This secondary research critically examines Pakistan's legal and policy responses to child abuse, focusing on four objectives: (1) reviewing national and international literature on legal frameworks, (2) identifying significant challenges and enforcement gaps, (3) comparing domestic mechanisms with international best practices, and (4) proposing evidence-based recommendations to strengthen the system. While progress has been made, the persistent high incidence of abuse and low rates of successful prosecution highlight the need for reforms that are both systemic and sustainable. By synthesizing existing research, this study aims to provide policymakers, practitioners, and advocates with actionable insights to bridge the gap between law and lived reality.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks in Child Protection

Child protection as an academic and policy field is rooted in an interdisciplinary nexus of human rights law, social policy, criminology, and public health. At its core, the *child rights-based approach* (United Nations, 1989) emphasizes that children are not passive recipients of welfare but autonomous rights-holders entitled to survival, development, protection, and participation. This approach imposes a legal duty on states to adopt proactive measures—legislative, administrative, and social—to prevent abuse and provide remedies when rights are violated. It is reinforced by international instruments such as the UNCRC's four general principles: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life, survival, and development, and the right to be heard (Lundy, 2007; Muzaffar, et. al., 2018). From a criminological perspective, routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) posits that abuse becomes more likely when three elements converge: a motivated offender, a suitable target (the child), and the absence of capable guardianship. This underscores the need for strong institutional safeguards, such as well-trained teachers, social workers, and law enforcement officers, to function as "capable guardians" in everyday settings. Similarly, situational crime prevention theory (Clarke, 1997) emphasizes modifying the immediate

environment to reduce opportunities for abuse through measures like controlled access to children in institutional settings, surveillance, and background checks on staff.

Public health frameworks, particularly the social ecology model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), add a multi-layered lens, analyzing how individual risk factors (e.g., a child's age or disability) interact with relational (family dynamics), community (school, neighborhood), and societal (cultural norms, laws) influences to either protect against or facilitate abuse. This approach is particularly relevant for countries like Pakistan, where societal factors such as patriarchal family structures, tolerance for corporal punishment, and reluctance to challenge authority figures can normalize abusive behaviors and inhibit disclosure (Ali & Khan, 2020). International scholarship also identifies five interdependent pillars of effective child protection systems:

- Early risk detection through proactive monitoring and reporting mechanisms;
- Coordinated multi-sectoral responses involving law enforcement, health, education, and social services;
- Strong legal deterrence via clear statutory definitions and meaningful penalties;
- Accessible rehabilitation and reintegration services for survivors;
- Sustained community engagement and prevention to address cultural acceptance of violence against children (Gilbert et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2019).

These principles find operationalization in some prominent models in the world. Closely related to the Children's House (Barnahus) model here in Iceland and Scandinavia is the integration of criminal investigation, child forensic interviewing, medical examination, and psychological support all under one roof, thus reducing secondary trauma. The UK created the multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH), which enables quick data sharing between health, education, social services and police, to evaluate and react to the child protection issues in real-time. Such statutory child protection is integrated with family support and early intervention services prevalent in the child welfare system in Australia, which has a holistic and preventive spirit. In the case of Pakistan, where the existing system is reactive primarily and disjointed, such frameworks provide conceptual advice, as well as practical models. The rights-based model pushes the state to adopt a crisis-oriented response to protection and incorporate the practice of protection as an ongoing duty. Criminological theories focus on environmental and institutional prevention, limiting opportunities to commit offences, whereas the social ecology model emphasizes interventions conducted simultaneously at the household, community, and societal levels. Transforming to take into account the socio-legal characteristics of the Pakistani environment, these frameworks can be improved to prevent abuse and help victims on their way to justice and recovery.

Global and Regional Perspectives on Child Abuse

Eradication of child abuse has continued to be a mirage in developed and developing nations despite decades of international advocacy. The inability to eliminate the abuse not only indicates the failures in law enforcement but also prevention, caring about survivors, and people having negative attitudes toward the rights of children. The well-developed legal systems in high-income countries like Norway, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand are supported with well-understood statutory definitions, dedicated investigation mechanisms, and service delivery programming. These countries have been investing in training law enforcement, creating child-friendly justice, and making sure that victim get holistic rehabilitation services such as psychological counseling, returning to school, and social reintegration (Council of Europe, 2022). As an example, the Barnahus approach in Norway has been regarded as an important step towards decreasing re-traumatization of children in the process of judicial prosecution, as interviews, medical examinations, and therapeutic work were all clustered into a single, safe, supportive setting. Likewise, New Zealand has the

Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children), which has a culturally responsive approach that incorporates Maori principles into the policies governing child welfare, respecting the role of indigenous views in child protection. Nonetheless, these best practices are usually hard to reproduce in lower-resource contexts because of systematic limitations. Financial constraints, poor infrastructure, shortages in skilled human resources and cultural stigma often dull the effects of even the well-written legislation (Pinheiro, 2006). In addition, the child protection systems in certain countries are compromised due to their existence within institutional corruption, fragile politics and weak governance. According to the World Health Organization (2020), without sufficient funding in institutional capacity and the political willingness to continue, legislative reforms are likely to be mere in their symbolism rather than effective change. Structural and cultural barriers spanning national boundaries in South Asia constitute that reduce the number of national boundaries. The underreporting of cases is chronic because of patriarchal norms, concern for the honor of the family, and unwillingness to appeal to the law enforcement apparatus in domestic issues. The Protection of Children against Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, enacted in India, is frequently mentioned as a legislative breakthrough because it has child-friendly courts and in-camera testimonies, as well as the creation of a statutory obligation of anyone with knowledge of an offence to either report or seek police help. Nevertheless, the rates of conviction do not exceed 30%, which is low because there are sometimes procedural delays and evidentiary difficulties, and families often walk away with a case due to social pressure (Bhattacharya, 2015; NCRB, 2022).

Other significant reforms made in Bangladesh include the enactment of child protection courts and child-sensitive procedures within criminal trials (UNICEF, 2020). Although this has helped in enhancing child victims about legal issues, the country still faces considerable capacity problems. Cops regularly receive no advanced methods for small children conversations, criminal examination, and trauma-informed policing. Furthermore, available support services to the victim population are principally inadequately financed and are, among other things, acutely concentrated in cities, leaving the children in the rural areas further unprotected. Another teaching example is Sri Lanka. To address this issue, the country has established Women and Children Desks in police stations, aiming to increase reporting and reduce intimidation. However, cultural hesitation to report certain family abuse persists (Fernando & Perera, 2018). Nepal has established children's protection as part of more inclusive disaster plans, as emergencies increase vulnerabilities. However, the lack of coordination between non-governmental organizations and the government hinders its contribution (Save the Children, 2019).



Figure 1 Comparative International Models for Child Protection Source: Compiled from Council of Europe (2022); UNICEF (2019); Pinheiro (2006); Bhattacharya (2015); NCRB (2022); Save the Children (2019).

These comparative insights illustrate that Pakistan's difficulties are neither unique nor insurmountable. They are part of a regional pattern where legislative frameworks exist but remain undermined by structural capacity gaps, socio-cultural resistance, and inconsistent enforcement. The South Asian experience also underscores the importance of

adapting international best practices to local socio-cultural realities rather than attempting to import models wholesale. Countries that have made meaningful progress have done so by combining legislative reform with public awareness campaigns, community-level engagement, specialized training for justice sector actors, and integrated survivor support services.

Prevalence, Patterns, and Emerging Forms of Abuse in Pakistan

The empirical evidence on child abuse in Pakistan consistently points to a high prevalence rate coupled with chronic underreporting, creating a significant gap between reported figures and the likely scale of the problem. Civil society organizations, particularly *Sahil*, have been at the forefront of documenting cases through their annual *Cruel Numbers Report*. The 2023 edition reported 4,504 cases of child sexual abuse, averaging 12 incidents per day (Sahil, 2023). Of these, a substantial proportion involved repeat offenders, known to the victims in many cases. However, as numerous researchers have observed (Hussain et al., 2021; Ali & Khan, 2020), these figures represent only a fraction of actual cases, given the absence of a unified national database, inconsistent police recording practices, and the societal stigma attached to reporting sexual offences involving children. The geographic distribution of reported cases highlights both urban and rural vulnerabilities, though the dynamics differ. In urban areas, cases are often linked to institutional failures in schools, orphanages, and workplaces, particularly in the informal sector, where child labour is prevalent. In rural communities, patriarchal norms and tight-knit social structures often suppress disclosure, as reporting may be perceived as a violation of family or community honor. Studies have also noted that rural survivors face additional logistical barriers to accessing justice, including distance from police stations, lack of trained medical personnel for forensic examinations, and inadequate shelter services for victims (NCRC, 2021). Contextual diversity of abuse in Pakistan extends beyond the domestic sphere.

Domestic settings: Physical and emotional abuse by parents, guardians, or extended family members remains widespread, with corporal punishment still socially accepted in many households despite legal prohibitions.

Educational institutions: Harassment and abuse by teachers or staff occur in environments lacking clear safeguarding policies or vetting procedures.

Religious seminaries (madrasas): Several high-profile cases have revealed sexual exploitation in settings with minimal state oversight, where the authority of religious instructors can discourage victims from speaking out (Amnesty International, 2020).

Workplaces: Children in domestic labor or bonded labor are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, with perpetrators benefiting from the child's economic dependence and social isolation.

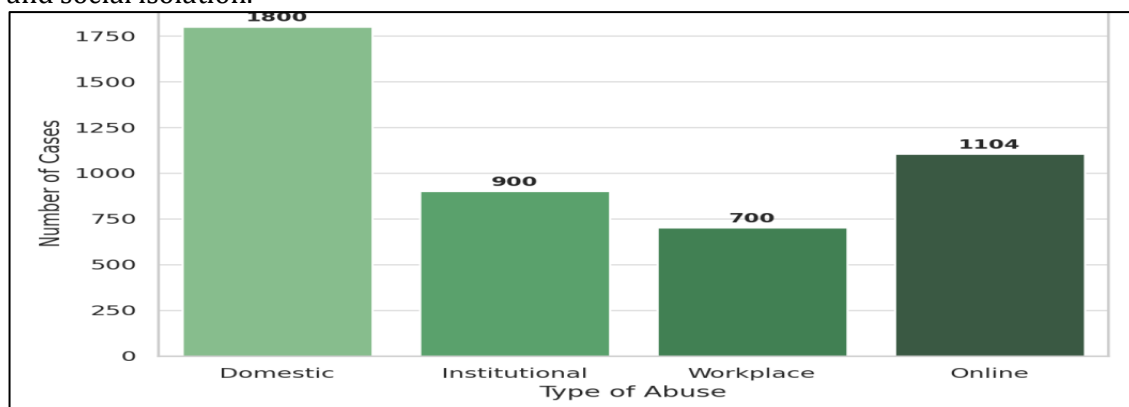


Figure 2 Reported Cases of Child Sexual Abuse in Pakistan (2023) Source: Sahil (2023); & Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (2023).

An increasingly critical dimension of the problem is digital exploitation. With internet penetration in Pakistan rising to over 54% of the population in 2023 (PTA, 2023), children are increasingly exposed to risks such as:

- **Online grooming:** Predators using social media, gaming platforms, and messaging apps to establish contact and manipulate victims.
- **Live-streamed abuse:** Perpetrators engaging in real-time exploitation, often for paying audiences.
- **Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM):** The production, distribution, and possession of explicit content involving minors, frequently shared via encrypted platforms that complicate detection.

While Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 criminalizes certain forms of online exploitation, enforcement remains weak due to limited digital forensics capacity, inadequate cross-border investigative cooperation, and the absence of specialized child cybercrime units within the Federal Investigation Agency (Khan & Qureshi, 2022). Moreover, public awareness of online safety is low, particularly among parents in rural and low-income communities, leaving children unprepared to identify and report predatory behaviors (UNICEF, 2024). Comparative insights from South Asia indicate that Pakistan's challenges mirror those of neighboring countries. For example, India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) has documented significant increases in online child exploitation cases under its POCSO Act since 2018, with similar patterns of underreporting in rural areas (NCRB, 2022). Bangladesh, too, has seen rising digital abuse, prompting the creation of specialized cyber units within its police force—an institutional innovation that Pakistan could adapt. The literature suggests that Pakistan's child abuse problem is multi-layered, encompassing traditional forms of abuse rooted in familial and institutional power imbalances, and emerging digital threats facilitated by rapid technological adoption without parallel protective measures. Addressing these patterns will require an integrated approach that strengthens offline and online protective environments, improves reporting and response mechanisms, and invests in specialized capacity-building for law enforcement, judiciary, and community workers.

Chronology and Evolution of Legal and Policy Responses in Pakistan

Before 1990, child protection provisions were scattered within the Pakistan Penal Code without child-specific protections. Ratifying the UNCRC in 1990 marked the start of formal obligations, but implementation lagged for a decade. In the 2000s, provincial pilot projects and donor-funded initiatives led to the creation of child protection units in Punjab and Sindh (SPARC, 2010). The 2010s brought more comprehensive reforms: the *Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016*, the *Juvenile Justice System Act 2018*, and expanded definitions of sexual offences. The 2018 murder of Zainab Ansari was a turning point, prompting the *Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act (2019)* and the creation of ZARRA. However, observers note these reforms have been reactive; often the result of media-fueled outrage rather than planned policy cycles (Ali & Khan, 2020).

Table 1
Chronology of Key Legal and Policy Reforms in Child Protection in Pakistan (Pre-1990 to 2019).

Period	Key Milestone / Reform	Description & Significance
Pre-1990	Scattered provisions in the Pakistan Penal Code	No dedicated child protection laws; abuse is addressed indirectly under general criminal provisions.
1990	Ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	Pakistan commits to international obligations to protect children from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation.
2000s	Provincial child protection units established	Initiated through pilot projects and donor-funded programs in Punjab and Sindh, aimed to provide intervention and support services for abused children (SPARC, 2010).

2016	Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016	Strengthened penalties for sexual abuse, trafficking, and child pornography; expanded specific definitions of offences.
2018	Juvenile Justice System Act 2018	Introduced procedural safeguards for minors in conflict with the law, aimed to prevent institutional abuse in the justice system.
2018	Zainab Ansari murder case	A high-profile case that triggered nationwide protests and There are demands for stronger legal protections for children.
2019	Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act.	Established federal agency to issue rapid alerts for missing children, coordinate recovery efforts, and maintain a national database; modeled partly on the U.S. AMBER Alert.

Source: Compiled from SPARC (2010); Ali & Khan (2020); National Commission on the Rights of Child (2021); Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act (2019).

Civil Society, Media, and Advocacy in Shaping Policy

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan have played an indispensable role in filling institutional and policy gaps in child protection. In the absence of a comprehensive, state-managed child welfare infrastructure, NGOs such as Sahil, the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC), and Rozan have emerged as key actors in monitoring abuse, raising public awareness, advocating for legislative change, and providing direct support to survivors.

“**Sahil**”, established in 1996, has become the country’s leading source for empirical data on child sexual abuse through its *Cruel Numbers* annual reports. These publications provide statistical breakdowns by type of abuse, victim-perpetrator relationship, and geographical distribution—data that journalists, researchers, and lawmakers often cite. Such evidence-based advocacy has directly informed parliamentary debates and the drafting of legislation, including amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code that criminalized child pornography and trafficking.

“**SPARC**”, founded in 1992, has maintained a broad child rights agenda encompassing education, child labor, and protection from violence. With the help of legal aid clinics, community campaigns, and policy papers, SPARC has advocated for the Provincial child protection legislation and the improved observance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It has also collaborated with provincial assemblies to develop guidance models for child protection laws. It has been involved in outreach to communities through challenging adverse social norms, such as corporal punishment.

“**Rozan**”, operating since 1998, focuses on psychosocial support, capacity building for service providers, and gender-based violence prevention. Through its program Aangan, it collaborates directly with children, teachers and parents, trying to create safe and supportive conditions within schools, and its training classes with police and the judiciary encourage trauma- and victim-based responses to the cases of abuse.

These local NGOs have collaborated with international organisations (including “UNICEF”, “Save the Children”, and “Plan International”) to provide technical competencies, finance, and policy advice. These collaborations have resulted in pilot projects for case management systems, child-friendly courtrooms, and hotlines for abuse reporting, some of which have been incorporated into provincial frameworks, albeit inconsistently.

The media has served as a powerful, though sometimes double-edged, driver of policy change. Investigative journalism has brought national attention to previously hidden abuses. The 2015–2016 Kasur child abuse scandal and the 2018 Zainab Ansari case exemplify how intense media scrutiny can catalyze public outrage, leading to mass protests, political commitments, and ultimately legislative action—in the latter case, the passage of the *Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act, 2019*. However, scholars and advocacy groups caution that sensationalist reporting can undermine survivor privacy, lead to secondary victimization, and sometimes compromise ongoing investigations (Amnesty International,

2020). The absence of universally applied ethical journalism guidelines for reporting on child abuse cases exacerbates these risks. Some media outlets have shown progress by adopting anonymization practices and avoiding victim-blaming narratives, but such approaches remain inconsistent across the sector.

Civil society and media have also collaborated in awareness campaigns, such as Sahil's "*Protecting Our Children*" initiative and Rozan's public service announcements on child safety in digital spaces. Such campaigns should not only be used in educating parents and communities but also in de-stigmatizing reporting to degrade the culture of silence, which facilitates the continuation of abuse. Overall, NGOs and media in Pakistan act as watchdogs and game-changers by holding state institutions accountable, filling service gaps, and influencing social opinion on child protection. Although their work has significantly advanced legislation and awareness, its overall impact is that it will rely on institutionalizing their innovations within formal state systems and ensuring that media advocacy is conducted in a manner that upholds a standard of protecting survivors. To sum up, the literature review based on the current research also highlights that although Pakistan has achieved measurable progress in the development of legislative instruments, civil society involvement, and public awareness-raising, this progress is still limited by structural flaws, lacks consistency in implementation, and is undercut by socio-cultural strongholds. Finding practicable solutions toward sustainable child rights protection in Pakistan will soon mean a paradigm shift away from the reactive, case-based approach to a proactive rights-based approach and a cautious, focused type of approach. Such transformation depends on the reinforcement of the institutional capacity, the promotion of the aligned and multi-sectoral response, the integration of survivor-centered approaches into the systems of law enforcement and courts, and the creation of societal conditions that cannot accept the victimization of children as the norm. It is only in such a combination of internationally-grounded best practice with local socio-cultural reality that passwords to legal rhetoric and protection in reality of children can be bridged in Pakistan.

Material and Methods

This qualitative secondary research utilizes a comprehensive literature survey of national laws and policies, research literature, institutional reports, and statistics in order to assess legal and policy interventions to child abuse in Pakistan. Key sources include the Pakistan Penal Code, Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016, Juvenile Justice System Act 2018, Zainab Alert Act 2019, provincial child protection laws, the UNCRC, and UNICEF's Minimum Standards for Child Protection. Data were obtained from Sahil, SPARC, Rozan, the NCRC, UNICEF, and comparable bodies in South Asia, alongside official statistics from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, and India's NCRB. Sources were selected for relevance, credibility, and recency, prioritizing publications from 2008 to 2023, except for foundational laws and landmark cases. A thematic content analysis was conducted, coding material into four categories: legal frameworks, enforcement challenges, international comparisons, and recommendations. Comparative analysis with models such as the Barnahus system (Scandinavia), Oranga Tamariki (New Zealand), and the POCSO Act (India) informed the evaluation. While comprehensive, this study is limited to secondary data and does not incorporate primary field research or stakeholder interviews. Consequently, the analysis relies on the accuracy of existing documentation, and the statistical interpretations may be influenced by incomplete or inconsistent reporting of abuse cases, particularly from rural areas.

Results and Discussion

The findings from this review highlight a recurring pattern in Pakistan's child protection system: legislative comprehensiveness coexists with significant implementation deficits. While the national legal framework—including the *Juvenile Justice System Act 2018* and the *Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2019*—is broadly consistent with

obligations under the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), its operationalization is uneven. In practice, enforcement is often catalyzed by extraordinary public or media attention rather than embedded within a systematic prevention and protection cycle (Amnesty International, 2020; Khan & Qureshi, 2022). This reactive pattern has resulted in inconsistent coverage and variable quality of interventions across jurisdictions.

Institutional Fragmentation and Operational Gaps

The institutional landscape for child protection in Pakistan is marked by overlapping mandates, unclear jurisdictional boundaries, and weak vertical and horizontal coordination. While multiple actors—such as provincial Child Protection Bureaus, Social Welfare Departments, the Federal Ministry of Human Rights, the Ministry of Law and Justice, and the police—share responsibility for various aspects of child protection, there is no centralized coordinating authority to ensure uniformity of policy and practice across the country. This institutional diffusion has resulted in duplicative efforts in some areas and complete service gaps in others. A central challenge lies in the absence of standardized inter-agency protocols that would define roles, timelines, and referral mechanisms in cases of child abuse. Currently, there is no universally adopted Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) governing how a case moves from initial reporting to investigation, prosecution, and rehabilitation. In practice, this means that a child who reports abuse might interact with law enforcement, health services, and judicial authorities in a disconnected sequence, often without coordinated follow-up or continuity of care (National Commission on the Rights of Child, 2021). This lack of integration is exacerbated by fragmented data management systems. Police, courts, and child protection units typically maintain separate case files, with little to no data sharing, creating blind spots in tracking case outcomes. As a result, it becomes difficult to monitor whether victims receive the promised psychosocial support or whether cases result in conviction. International models—such as the integrated case management systems in the UK's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command—demonstrate that real-time information sharing across agencies can significantly improve investigative efficiency and victim protection (UK National Crime Agency, 2023).

Capacity disparities between provinces further deepen these operational gaps. Punjab, for instance, has the most developed network of Child Protection Units, staffed with dedicated social workers, legal officers, and counselors. In contrast, provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa operate with severely limited staffing levels, often lacking specialized personnel trained in child-sensitive interviewing or trauma-informed care (SPARC, 2010). This unevenness in service delivery creates a postcode lottery effect, where a child's access to timely and appropriate support depends largely on geographic location. Moreover, in the absence of a binding federal-provincial coordination mechanism, policy implementation is inconsistent. Federal laws, such as the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act, rely on provincial bodies for execution, but without standardized guidelines, provincial authorities interpret and apply these laws differently. This inconsistency undermines the principle of equal protection under the law and can erode public trust in child protection institutions. Finally, budgetary allocations for child protection remain ad hoc and insufficient, particularly at the provincial level. Without earmarked funds, many child protection units operate on minimal resources, limiting their capacity to conduct outreach, preventive programming, or long-term victim rehabilitation. International best practices show that sustainable funding, paired with statutory mandates, is crucial for operational stability (Gilbert et al., 2009).

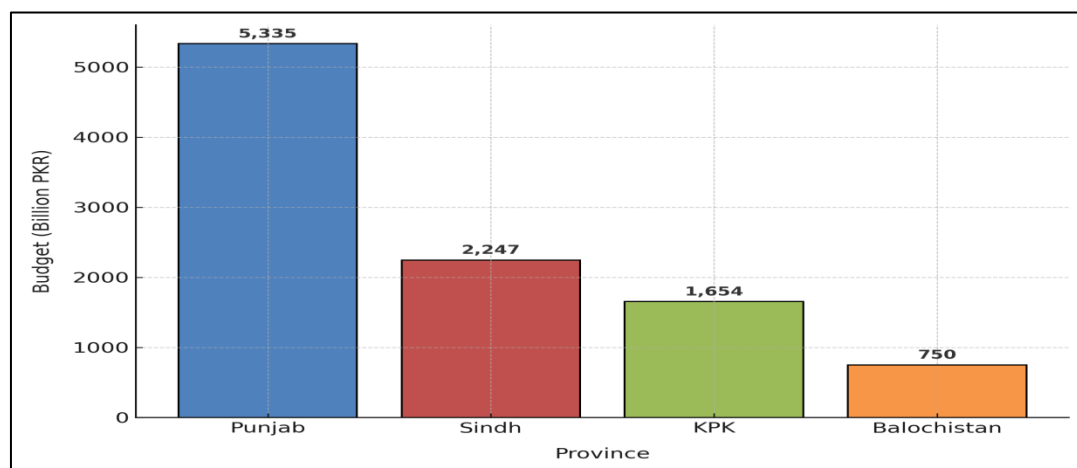


Figure 3 Provincial Budgets For Child Protection Source: Provincial budget summaries, Finance Departments of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan (2023–2024).

Absence of Single-Window and Victim-Centric Services

The comparative review strongly indicates that Pakistan lacks a centralized, multidisciplinary service model for child victims of abuse—a structural feature present in many jurisdictions with stronger protection outcomes. In international best-practice models such as Norway’s *Barnahus* (Children’s House) and New Zealand’s *Oranga Tamariki* framework, all critical services—law enforcement, forensic medical examinations, psychological support, and legal assistance—are co-located within a child-friendly facility (Council of Europe, 2022). This arrangement ensures that a child need only recount their experience once, in a supportive and non-intimidating environment, with the recorded interview serving both investigative and judicial purposes (Gilbert et al., 2009). In Pakistan, the procedural reality is markedly different. Victims are required to navigate multiple, disconnected institutional settings—a police station for the First Information Report (FIR), a government hospital for medical examination, and various court appearances for testimony—often without dedicated caseworkers to accompany them through the process. This fragmented pathway not only increases the likelihood of retraumatization but also risks inconsistencies in testimony due to repeated questioning by different actors (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Furthermore, investigative procedures are rarely adapted to the developmental and psychological needs of child victims, with many interviews conducted in intimidating environments, often in the presence of the accused or unrelated adults, contrary to child-sensitive investigation protocols recommended by UNICEF (2019).

From an evidentiary standpoint, the absence of coordinated, single-location services can compromise the integrity of investigations. Delays in medical examinations reduce the likelihood of obtaining usable forensic evidence, while fragmented documentation increases the risk of procedural challenges in court. In addition, the lack of embedded psychosocial support means that many victims drop out of the judicial process before a verdict is reached—either due to emotional distress or external pressure from perpetrators’ families (Ali & Khan, 2020). In contrast, *Barnahus* and similar models employ trained forensic interviewers, psychologists, and legal experts who operate under a unified case management protocol, ensuring timely evidence collection, minimizing repeat interviews, and providing ongoing therapeutic support. These facilities also integrate victim rehabilitation planning into the initial response, recognizing that recovery and justice are interdependent processes. Without such an integrated model, Pakistan’s response remains predominantly transactional—focused on case closure rather than the holistic well-being of the child. The absence of a single-window mechanism thus represents not just a service delivery gap but a systemic barrier to both justice and long-term recovery.

Underdeveloped Preventive Infrastructure

The review reveals that Pakistan's child protection system is heavily response-oriented, with limited structural investment in primary prevention. Most legislative provisions are designed to activate after an offence has occurred, such as initiating criminal investigations, prosecuting offenders, or providing post-incident rehabilitation. This contrasts with the integrated prevention models advocated by UNICEF (2019) and the World Health Organization (2020), which prioritize early identification, risk mitigation, and education as foundational elements of protection systems. A core weakness lies in the absence of nationwide, state-led prevention campaigns. In high-performing jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, public education initiatives are embedded into school curricula, broadcast media, and community health services to teach children about body autonomy, safe and unsafe touch, and how to report abuse (Gilbert et al., 2009). These campaigns are systematically evaluated and updated to reflect emerging threats, such as online grooming. By contrast, in Pakistan, such initiatives are sporadic, geographically limited, and often NGO-driven—for example, Sahil's community awareness sessions and Rozan's "Aangan" school-based safety program. While impactful at the local level, these efforts lack the scale, sustainability, and national policy backing necessary to create a lasting culture of prevention.

Parental and caregiver education is another neglected dimension. Evidence from multiple settings shows that parents who receive structured guidance on child development, non-violent discipline, and digital safety are more likely to create protective home environments and to recognize early signs of abuse (WHO, 2020). In Pakistan, however, such programs are rare, usually implemented as pilot projects in urban centers and seldom institutionalized within public health or social welfare systems. The absence of parental engagement in state policy perpetuates gaps in informal guardianship, especially in rural and low-literacy settings where awareness of children's rights is minimal (Hussain et al., 2021). The preventive infrastructure is further weakened by limited early detection mechanisms. Teachers, healthcare workers, and religious leaders—who are often in daily contact with children—are not systematically trained or mandated to recognize and report signs of abuse. In countries like India under the POCSO Act (2012), mandatory reporting requirements have increased case detection, albeit with enforcement challenges (Bhattacharya, 2015). Pakistan's legal framework contains no equivalent blanket provision requiring all professionals working with children to report suspected abuse, resulting in missed opportunities for early intervention.

Community-based prevention networks, a key feature in global best practice, are almost absent at the national level. In Nepal, for example, village-level child protection committees—supported by NGOs and the state—act as frontline monitors, reporting risks to district child protection offices (Save the Children, 2019). In Pakistan, similar structures are rare and typically externally funded, leading to discontinuation once donor projects end. The lack of institutionalized local watch systems means that prevention is reactive and fragmented, dependent on individual initiative rather than embedded in community governance. Digital safety prevention is also underdeveloped. With over 54% of Pakistan's population now online (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2023), children face escalating risks from online grooming, sextortion, and child sexual abuse material (CSAM) distribution (UNICEF, 2024). Yet, public awareness campaigns on safe internet use are limited, law enforcement's cybercrime units are under-resourced, and school curricula rarely cover digital literacy or online safety. In contrast, countries like South Korea and the UK have integrated online safety modules into compulsory education and maintain 24/7 cyber tip lines for rapid reporting (UK National Crime Agency, 2023). The cumulative effect of these deficiencies is a reactive protection cycle—where systemic response mechanisms are triggered only after significant harm occurs. This approach perpetuates both underreporting and re-victimization, particularly in rural, socio-culturally conservative settings, where stigma, victim-blaming, and fear of reputational damage suppress

disclosure. Without a deliberate policy shift toward prevention—through nationwide awareness campaigns, institutionalized parental training, mandatory reporting laws, community watch networks, and integrated digital safety education—Pakistan’s child protection system will remain crisis-driven and fail to address the root causes of abuse.

Role and Limitations of Civil Society

The evidence highlights the indispensable yet structurally constrained role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan’s child protection ecosystem. In the absence of a fully developed and adequately funded state-led protection infrastructure, NGOs such as Sahil, the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC), and Rozan have emerged as critical actors in case documentation, survivor support, advocacy, and awareness raising. Sahil’s *Cruel Numbers* reports are regarded as the most reliable empirical dataset on child sexual abuse in Pakistan, offering disaggregated statistics by age, gender, type of abuse, and victim–perpetrator relationship. This evidence base has informed parliamentary debates, guided media coverage, and shaped donor funding priorities (Sahil, 2023). SPARC, through its community outreach and policy advocacy, has successfully lobbied for provincial child protection legislation, while Rozan has pioneered psychosocial intervention models, particularly within schools and police training programs.

CSOs also extend service coverage into rural and peri-urban areas where formal state presence is weak. Mobile legal aid clinics, school safety workshops, and community theatre initiatives have allowed these organizations to reach children and families who might otherwise remain invisible to formal protection systems (Ali & Khan, 2020). Furthermore, CSOs often serve as first responders in high-profile abuse cases, providing shelter, medical referrals, and legal representation when state mechanisms are slow to activate. However, this pivotal role is undermined by structural and financial constraints. Most NGOs operate on short-term, project-based funding cycles, heavily reliant on external donors. When funding period’s lapse, critical services—such as child helplines, community safe spaces, and counseling programs—risk discontinuation, leading to service instability and loss of public trust (Amnesty International, 2020). Moreover, despite their frontline role, CSOs remain peripheral to the formal child protection apparatus. There are few institutionalized referral pathways connecting them to police, courts, and social welfare departments, and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) are often ad hoc rather than embedded in statutory frameworks. This lack of formal integration limits their ability to influence systemic change and results in a parallel service network that, while valuable, operates without the legal authority or resource guarantees of state institutions. The international literature underscores that effective child protection systems integrate civil society actors into formal case management structures, enabling shared databases, joint training, and co-developed protocols (Gilbert et al., 2009). Without such integration, Pakistan risks continuing to rely on NGO interventions as stopgap measures rather than as embedded components of a sustainable, state-led child protection framework.

Data Deficits and Policy Blind Spots

A critical finding of this review is the absence of a comprehensive, centralized child protection data system in Pakistan. While the *Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Agency (ZARRA)* maintains a registry for missing children, its mandate is narrow and does not extend to systematically tracking cases of abuse, prosecutorial outcomes, or the provision of victim services. As a result, policymakers lack the longitudinal, disaggregated datasets necessary to identify trends, allocate resources efficiently, or evaluate the effectiveness of legal reforms (National Commission on the Rights of Child, 2021). Currently, data is fragmented across multiple entities. Police maintain First Information Report (FIR) records, hospitals store medical examination data, courts hold case files, and NGOs like Sahil document abuse cases through independent monitoring. These datasets are rarely harmonized, use inconsistent definitions, and are often inaccessible to researchers or

policymakers. This fragmentation leads to statistical blind spots—for example, national prevalence rates remain contested due to underreporting, inconsistent categorization of abuse types, and exclusion of certain contexts (such as online exploitation) from official crime categories (Khan & Qureshi, 2022). In contrast, jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom's *Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP)* operate integrated, inter-agency databases that consolidate police, health, education, and social service records (UK National Crime Agency, 2023). These systems enable near real-time monitoring, facilitate proactive interventions, and provide the evidence base for both operational and policy-level decision-making. Pakistan's data blind spots also have policy consequences. Without accurate, timely, and disaggregated data—broken down by age, gender, geography, and abuse type—legislators cannot identify high-risk populations, design targeted prevention programs, or measure the long-term impact of reforms. This limitation has been noted in other South Asian contexts; for example, India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) publishes annual data under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, but even there, researchers have called for more granular, case-level data to drive policy innovation (NCRB, 2022). Establishing a national child protection information management system in Pakistan would address many of these gaps. Such a system would require standardized definitions, mandatory reporting protocols, and interoperability across agencies, coupled with strong data privacy safeguards. Without it, policy will continue to be shaped reactively—triggered by high-profile cases—rather than strategically informed by comprehensive, evidence-based trend analysis.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a paradox in Pakistan's child protection landscape: while the country has developed a robust legislative framework, including the *Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016*, the *Juvenile Justice System Act 2018*, and the *Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2019*, these measures coexist with fragmented and under-resourced institutional delivery mechanisms. This gap between law and practice is consistent with global research indicating that legislative reform alone is insufficient to produce meaningful protection outcomes without corresponding investments in institutional capacity, prevention infrastructure, and multi-sectoral coordination (Gilbert et al., 2009; Pinheiro, 2006). Since ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 (United Nations, 1989), Pakistan's reforms have aligned with international obligations, yet operationalization remains inconsistent and reactive, often driven by media coverage and public outrage after high-profile cases (Amnesty International, 2020; Khan & Qureshi, 2022). This contrasts with high-performing systems like Norway's *Barnahus* model, which embeds legislative mandates within integrated, child-centered infrastructures functioning continuously rather than episodically (Council of Europe, 2022). A major barrier is the lack of standardized inter-agency protocols and centralized coordination, as child protection responsibilities are dispersed among provincial Child Protection Bureaus, social welfare departments, police, and judiciary with minimal case information sharing (NCRC, 2021). This fragmentation undermines continuity of care for victims, whereas integrated service hubs in other countries reduce re-traumatization, improve evidence quality, and enhance conviction rates (Gilbert et al., 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Another critical gap is the severe underinvestment in prevention, with Pakistan's system largely reactive and focused on post-incident intervention rather than risk reduction. In countries such as the UK and Australia, public education on child rights, safe touch, and online safety is embedded in school curricula and reinforced through national awareness campaigns (Gilbert et al., 2009), while in Pakistan such initiatives are mostly NGO-led, limited in geographic reach, and lack sustained government funding. The absence of mandatory reporting laws for all professionals working with children further weakens early detection (Bhattacharya, 2015; Hussain et al., 2021). Civil society organizations such as Sahil, SPARC, and Rozan fill many of these gaps by providing legal aid, psychosocial support, awareness campaigns, and critical data (Sahil, 2023; Ali & Khan, 2020), but their

work is constrained by project-based funding cycles and a lack of formal integration into state-led frameworks. In high-functioning systems, NGOs are embedded into official referral mechanisms to ensure continuity of care and coordinated case handling (UNICEF, 2019). The absence of a comprehensive, centralized child protection database in Pakistan is another major barrier to evidence-based policymaking, as current data remains fragmented across multiple agencies and NGOs without standardized definitions or interoperability (NCRC, 2021; Khan & Qureshi, 2022).

International models such as the UK's CEOP demonstrate how integrated data systems can inform both operational priorities and strategic planning (UK National Crime Agency, 2023). While global models like *Barnahus* or India's POCSO Act offer valuable lessons, their direct transplantation to Pakistan is unlikely without socio-cultural and resource adaptation. A hybrid model—combining integrated service delivery, mandatory reporting, and community-based prevention—could offer a feasible pathway forward, but this would require political will, sustainable funding, and cultural change to reduce stigma and encourage reporting. Ultimately, the results underscore a strategic misalignment between Pakistan's legislative intent and its operational capacity, and highlight the need for systemic integration of prevention, protection, and rehabilitation within a coordinated, well-resourced framework to effectively safeguard children from abuse.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that Pakistan's child protection system is characterized by a structural imbalance between legislative comprehensiveness and implementation capacity. While the enactment of laws such as the *Juvenile Justice System Act 2018* and the *Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2019* reflects alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), their enforcement is hindered by institutional fragmentation, insufficient preventive infrastructure, limited integration of civil society, and critical data deficits. The current approach remains predominantly reactive, with interventions often triggered by high-profile incidents rather than embedded in a sustained prevention and protection cycle. International best practices, such as Norway's *Barnahus* model and India's POCSO Act, offer valuable insights but require contextual adaptation to Pakistan's socio-cultural and resource environment. Bridging the gap between policy and practice will require systemic reforms—including centralized coordination mechanisms, single-window victim services, mandatory reporting laws, and a comprehensive national child protection database—supported by sustainable political and financial commitments. Equally important is the need to institutionalize prevention through nationwide awareness campaigns, school-based safety education, community monitoring networks, and parental training programs. Civil society organizations, which currently act as essential but parallel safety nets, must be formally integrated into state frameworks to ensure coordinated, survivor-centered responses. Ultimately, safeguarding Pakistan's children from abuse demands a holistic, multi-sectoral strategy that unites legal, institutional, and community-based efforts under a coherent national framework. Without such an integrated approach, legislative reforms will remain symbolic, and the country will continue to fall short of its international obligations and moral responsibility to protect its most vulnerable citizens.

Recommendations

To effectively address the persistent gaps between Pakistan's legislative commitments and the realities of child protection service delivery, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed, drawing on international best practices and tailored to the country's socio-cultural and institutional context:

- Create a federal-level multidisciplinary body to harmonize the work of provincial Child Protection Bureaus, social welfare departments, police, judiciary, and civil society.

- Develop and enforce standardized inter-agency protocols for case referrals, definitions, and service delivery.
- Implement integrated service centers in high-incidence districts, modeled on the *Barnahus* system.
- Conduct community awareness campaigns and parental education programs.
- Train frontline professionals—teachers, healthcare workers, and religious leaders—on early detection and mandatory reporting.
- Create an interoperable system consolidating data from police, health, judiciary, and NGOs.
- Sign memoranda of understanding with NGOs for joint case management and referrals.
- Allocate dedicated budgets for child protection at federal and provincial levels.
- Conduct regular policy evaluations and ensure reforms are consistently implemented nationwide.

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