

## CASE STUDY

# CHILD RIGHTS GROUP OF THE PAKISTAN PAEDIATRIC ASSOCIATION, PAKISTAN

How to advocate for boy survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse using different forms of evidence and seizing momentum for change?



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## CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTATION

Given that programmatic responses to identify and meet the particular needs of boys are scarce, ECPAT International launched the [ECPAT Global Boys Initiative \(GBI\)](#) to explore the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and the services available for their protection. The ECPAT Global Boys Initiative embarked on a series of research projects in countries around the world to shed light on understanding the scale of sexual exploitation taking place with children, vulnerability contexts and risk factors, barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what we need to improve prevention and response strategies.

We know that the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys is a global problem and have gathered information on key drivers, risk situations, gender norms, and barriers to access, among other things. We are now focusing on how to address these challenges and how to support boys and service providers in the fight against sexual exploitation. In July 2022, we began a process of mobilising ECPAT members, partners and practitioners working with boys in different regions of the world to inform them about the GBI, explore possibilities for implementing the Initiative at country and regional levels, and capitalise on members' and partners' experiences in working with boys.

In line with this global effort, discussions with the Child Rights Group of the Pakistan Paediatric Association highlighted several key learning points on how the medical and child rights communities can work together to improve the protection of boys from sexual violence. In a context where sexual exploitation and abuse of boys have multiple forms but had been largely overlooked for a long time, this case study examines how, by leveraging the credibility and trusted role of paediatricians as a strategic entry point, it is possible to integrate clinical expertise, advocacy, and policy engagement. While helping answer the question: *“How can we work with children and young boys at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse through a gender-sensitive approach?”*

# INTRODUCTION

The [Child Rights Group of the Pakistan Paediatric Association](#) (CRG-PPA) is a specialised body within the Pakistan Paediatric Association (PPA), a national representation association that includes approximately 3,000 paediatricians working to improve the health and well-being of children in Pakistan. The CRG-PPA was established in 1989, following Pakistan's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was created in recognition of the important role paediatricians can play in protecting children from violence, abuse, and neglect. Since its founding, the CRG-PPA has brought together approximately 200 paediatricians from across the country who are dedicated to advancing child protection through their clinical practice, advocacy, research, and engagement with communities.

The primary objective of the CRG-PPA is to uphold and safeguard the rights of children in Pakistan, being dedicated to preventing child abuse, neglect, and sexual exploitation of children across the nation. To achieve this, the CRG-PPA is committed to:

- **Raise public awareness:**

The CRG-PPA engages in awareness campaigns to educate the public about children's rights and prevent abuse and neglect.

- **Advocate and lobby:**

The CRG-PPA advocates for policies and laws that protect children's rights and prevent abuse and neglect; moreover, it develops its own policy statements and position papers on various issues related to child abuse, neglect and exploitation. All policy statements and position papers developed by the Group are also shared with the Pakistan Pediatric Association Executive Committee for critical feedback and adoption by the whole Pediatric Association.

- **Collect data:**

The CRG-PPA gathers essential data to better understand the scope of child abuse and neglect, enabling evidence-based advocacy and interventions.

- **Research:**

The CRG-PPA contributes to expanding the knowledge base through research, which will inform effective strategies for the prevention and management of child abuse and neglect.

- **Capacity Strengthening:**

The CRG-PPA empowers professionals involved in child protection through capacity-strengthening initiatives.

The CRG-PPA restricts membership to paediatricians only. Therefore, to engage a wider range of stakeholders, including social workers, psychologists, law enforcement, justice personnel, and other civil society organisations, the organisation has evolved by establishing three provincial-level non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These NGOs help activate the partnerships required to advance the mission of the CRG-PPA.

1. Based in Lahore, Protection and Help of Children Against Abuse and Neglect ([PAHCHAAN](#)), is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the protection and promotion of child rights in Punjab. Established two decades ago, PAHCHAAN works to build a safer future for children and families across the province. PAHCHAAN provides training and information to parents and alternative caregivers, helping them to understand the children's needs and how to respond to situations of abuse or neglect. In parallel, the organisation supports economic and financial stability for families, recognising that poverty and stress are key risk factors for violence and exploitation. Over the years, PAHCHAAN has reached thousands of households across Pakistan, combining child protection, family support, and awareness-raising to create safer environments for children.

In 2009, PAHCHAAN established the first hospital-based Child Protection Unit (CPU) in South Asia at the Children's Hospital in Lahore. Since its inception, the CPU has managed over 2,300 cases of severe child abuse and neglect, providing affected children with medical, surgical, psychological, and legal support. Many of these families have also received social and financial assistance to help stabilise their situations. In addition to clinical response, PAHCHAAN implements a range of community-based interventions. Through various programmes, it supports children and their families with health and nutrition, access to quality education, and protection from all forms of violence and neglect.

2. In the province of Sindh, [Konpal Child Abuse Prevention Society](#) (Konpal), headquartered in Karachi, is a non-political, non-sectarian, non-governmental voluntary social welfare organisation. Founded by a group of child rights activists, who share the common vision of a society free of child abuse, with zero tolerance against sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of children, involvement of children in hazardous occupation, armed conflicts and violence.

Konpal works to prevent abuse and support child survivors through awareness-raising, service delivery, research and capacity strengthening. It conducts public education campaigns, trains healthcare providers, teachers, parents, and children on prevention and early detection, and has established Hospital Child Protection Committees in major hospitals in Karachi. These are being linked to school-based child protection mechanisms for coordinated response.

3. HELP – Health, Education and Livelihood Promotion, is a non-governmental organisation based in Quetta, working to improve the well-being of communities across Balochistan. As a sister organisation of the CRG-PPA, HELP places strong emphasis on promoting children's rights and protecting them from all forms of abuse and exploitation. It provides essential services such as clean water, healthcare and education to children and coal miners.

# METHODOLOGY FOR DOCUMENTING PRACTICES

This case study was carried out using a semi-structured assessment and learning tool developed by the ECPAT International Research and Global Boys Initiative teams. The evaluation and learning questionnaire guided the interview with the teams working with the boys. The questions included in the questionnaire were designed to gather information on the practices considered effective by the organisations in supporting sexually exploited and abused boys.

The methodology was applied during an in-person, half-day meeting, followed by several follow-up discussions led by the ECPAT Global Boys Initiative team to address outstanding questions. The ECPAT Global Boys Initiative's research shows that boys tend to fall between the cracks of child protection systems due to prejudices about their victimisation, as boys are often not seen as potential victims of sexual exploitation and abuse due to gender norms that do not see them as potentially at risk. This is even more relevant in Pakistan, where this issue had long remained unacknowledged or ignored due to its normalisation.

This case study is based on these findings and provides elements for reflection and recommendations in working specifically with boys in this context. The experiences gained by the CRG-PPA and its partner organisations' teams offer important lessons on how to leverage roles and key opportunities to gradually gain visibility and build momentum for change.



# KEY CHALLENGES

1)

## General context

The initial goal of the CRG-PPA in 1989 was to integrate greater attention to the sexual exploitation of boys into national child protection efforts, not as a standalone issue, but as one that had been persistently under-recognised within broader responses to violence against boys. The CRG-PPA's mission began from a growing recognition, both nationally and internationally, that child protection systems remain incomplete and discriminatory when they fail to acknowledge all forms of abuse. The organisations' work aimed to shed light on how boys experience exploitation across different contexts, including settings such as child labour, street environments, religious institutions, and trafficking routes.

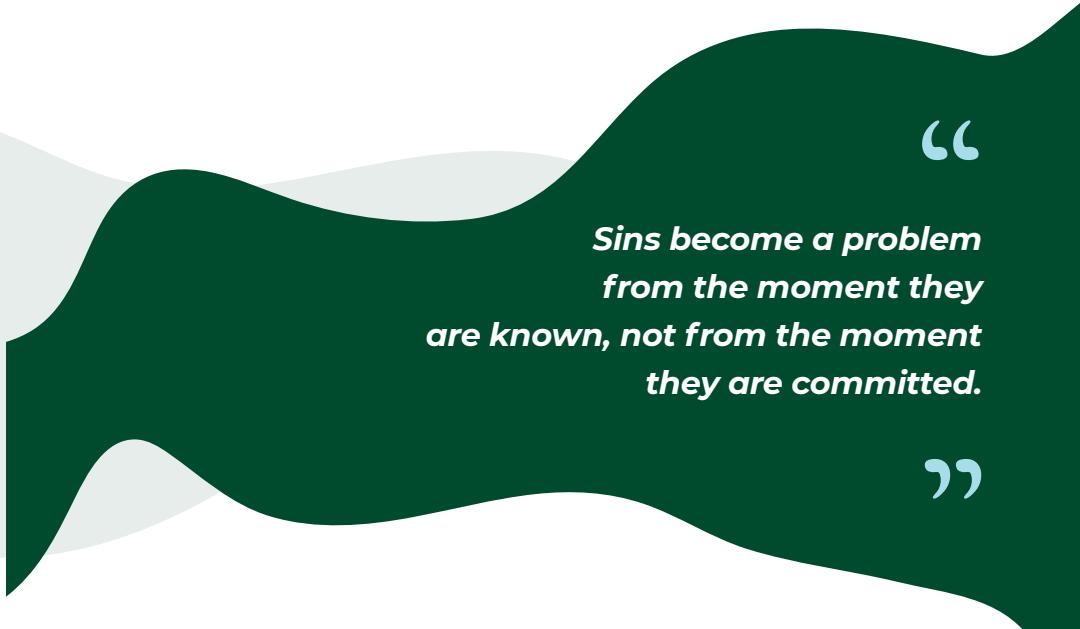
At the same time, the CRG-PPA sought to show how stereotypes on gender and power dynamics influence not only the abuse itself, but also boy survivors' ability and willingness to report what they have experienced.

However, this advocacy agenda faced obstacles at every level. At the social level, discussing sexual violence involving boys was considered culturally sensitive, even taboo, and was often framed as a matter of morality or criticised as promoting a "Western" agenda. Institutionally, the medical and child protection sectors were not equipped to address these cases in a coordinated way, and professionals often lacked the language, confidence, or mandate to speak about them. Politically, government priorities continued to shift, and there were ongoing debates about whether this kind of advocacy work was appropriate for the context of Pakistan.

**These pushback and uncertainty revealed deeper structural discomforts and unresolved questions within the child protection field**, such as how to balance visibility with safety, how to engage with communities without reinforcing stigma, and how to respond to institutional pressures while maintaining credibility. The case does not illustrate a failure to act, but rather the reality that efforts to address historically silenced forms of abuse inevitably bring up discomfort, resistance, and negotiation. These tensions must be understood not just as obstacles, but as indicators of where systems need to become more inclusive, more honest, and ultimately more protective of boys.

*Bacha Bazi* – which translates literally to “boy play” – is a practice found in certain rural areas of north-western Pakistan where wealthy and powerful older men keep adolescent boys in their houses for entertainment and sexual purposes. These men use boys as concubines, often targeting those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Rather than being hidden, *Bacha Bazi* is often accepted as part of local life and is widely known within these communities. Boys grow up understanding that powerful men may demand sexual favours, and that this abuse is unlikely to be questioned or condemned. However, even where the practice is commonly known, people are reluctant to talk about it openly. There is a strong social expectation not to discuss these kinds of issues, especially not in public. This silence is not just a sign of acceptance, but also of unease, it reveals a deep tension between the awareness that these acts violate boys’ rights and the fear of dishonour that open discussion might bring.

*Bacha Bazi* is one of the most visible examples of a much broader culture of silence surrounding the sexual exploitation of boys in Pakistan. This culture is deeply rooted in social norms related to honour, shame, and reputation. Across communities, there is a widely held belief that talking about sexual abuse, brings more harm than the abuse itself. Used sayings like “*sins become a problem from the moment they are known, not from the moment they are committed*” or “*the more you talk about it, the more it will happen*” reflect this mindset. **The focus is not necessarily on stopping the abuse, but on avoiding its public acknowledgement.** As a result, families, communities, and even institutions often prefer to remain silent rather than confront or report abuse.



***Sins become a problem from the moment they are known, not from the moment they are committed.***

The CRG-PPA encountered this culture of silence repeatedly in its work. When ECPAT International launched the 2006 Global Monitoring Report on the status of action against commercial sexual exploitation of children<sup>1</sup>: Pakistan,<sup>2</sup> the response was mixed. On one hand, the report received international recognition and helped open space for greater advocacy on child protection in Pakistan. On the other hand, it also triggered strong backlash, especially in areas where practices like *Bacha Bazi* were known but not publicly acknowledged. Local leaders and authorities accused the CRG-PPA of “promoting sin” or “encouraging immorality” for documenting and naming abuse. They argued that speaking about such issues publicly would bring dishonour to families and communities. Several provinces and traditional authorities criticised the report for focusing on practices within their country, rather than recognising the broader, national picture of child sexual exploitation.

3)

## Madrasas

This culture of silence is also seen in other settings, such as religious schools, where sexual abuse of boys is often denied, minimised, or handled informally to protect reputations. The belief that boys could “move on” from abuse easily, that they could return to a “normal” life without long-term impact, shaped how families approached the justice system. In fact, the CRG-PPA noted that when a boy disclosed abuse, families often preferred informal resolution through community mediation rather than pursuing legal proceedings. According to data collected in 2022, only 3.6% of sexual abuse cases brought to authorities, led to the conviction of perpetrators in Punjab.<sup>3</sup> The hope was that a quick settlement would allow the family to avoid shame and help the boy “get back to normality,” avoiding attention or stigma.

Religious schools, known as **Madrasas** or *Madaris-e-Deeniya*, have long been part of Pakistani society. These institutions focus on teaching religious principles, providing elementary and secondary education, often run or closely linked with religious authorities. *Madrasas* typically enrol boys from disadvantaged backgrounds and provide free education, meals, and accommodation.

As early as 1998, a Working Group made up of civil society organisations was created with the purpose of proposing the content of the first National Plan of Action for Children of Pakistan on the sexual exploitation of children.<sup>4</sup> The Working Group against Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, comprising the CRG-PPA, [Sahil](#), [Rozan](#), [SACH – Struggle for Change, Vision](#), and [Save the Children Sweden](#), produced reports documenting the prevalence of the sexual exploitation of boys in *madrasas*. These findings pointed to a recurring cycle of abuse; many of

1 The term “commercial sexual exploitation of children” has been replaced by the broader term “sexual exploitation of children”; for more information see: Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2025). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Section D.

2 ECPAT International (2006). *Global Monitoring – Pakistan: Report on the status of action against commercial sexual exploitation of children*.

3 Saeed, A. (2023). [Conviction rate in sexual crimes cases stands at 3.6% in 2022](#). Voicepk.net.

4 Ministry of Social Welfare and Special Education, National Commission for Child Welfare and Development (NCCWD), Government of Pakistan (2006). [National Plan of Action for Children](#).

the adult men who were currently working in *madrasas* had previously been students there themselves and were likely subjected to abuse by adult staff when they were boys. Once in positions of authority, some replicated similar patterns of abuse. In this way, sexual violence was passed down from one generation to the next, normalised and embedded into daily life within certain of these institutions. In some cases, the abuse was not only continued but came to be seen as a form of entitlement, an assertion of authority by those who had once been powerless. This reflects how violence and control became part of how adults related to boys, influenced by deeply rooted norms, silence, and institutional structures that allowed these practices to persist.

When representatives of the Working Group met with authorities responsible for managing and supporting these institutions, they encountered strong resistance, not because the problem was denied, but because of the **perceived consequences of public reporting**. The authorities acknowledged the issue but expressed concern that highlighting such abuse could damage the reputation of *madrasas* and threaten the public donations they rely on to function. As these schools often depend entirely on charitable funding, the reports were seen as a threat to their subsistence. As a result, members of the Working Group were repeatedly asked to stop linking *madrasas* with the sexual exploitation of boys.

In this context, efforts to protect boys and ensure accountability come into tension with efforts to preserve essential services for them. The moral and practical dilemma between exposing abuse and protecting the institutional structures that provide free meals, shelter and education contributed to a collective silence. The result is a dangerous equilibrium where abuse is tolerated or concealed to avoid disrupting the systems that are supposed to support boys.

These examples demonstrate how assumptions about boys' resilience, combined with institutional pressures and cultural silence, contribute to the ongoing minimisation and normalisation of sexual exploitation. The long-term impact on boys' mental health, understanding of relationships, and internalisation of power dynamics remain poorly acknowledged, both at the community level and within the justice system. This **culture of silence is widespread and systemic**, affecting every level of society, from families and communities to the media, religious leaders, service providers, and state institutions.

4)

## How ideas about masculinity prevent boys from speaking about sexual abuse

In Pakistan, boys who experience sexual abuse face social and cultural barriers when it comes to speaking out. One of the most powerful barriers is the deep-rooted idea that admitting to having been abused somehow undermines a boy's masculinity. As in other contexts, there is a strong cultural expectation that boys should be strong, emotionally silent, and in control. Within this mindset, being a survivor of any form of abuse, especially sexual abuse, is wrongly seen as a sign of weakness or failure.

**This harmful belief often results in boys being mocked, stigmatised, or labelled with demeaning names that question their strength, character, and masculinity.** These labels may be hurtful, and they also isolate boys further and discourage them from seeking out help. A boy who discloses abuse may be seen as having lost his dignity or his social standing, not only in the eyes of his peers but also within his own family and community. The fear of being seen as “less than a man” can be so intense that many boys carry the weight of their experiences in silence. This stigma is reinforced by a culture of honour and shame, which prioritises the reputation of the family and community over the well-being of the individual. When a boy is abused, families often prefer to stay silent, fearing that speaking up will bring shame on them. In some cases, families actively discourage or even threaten boys to prevent them from disclosing what happened.

The abuser, meanwhile, is rarely seen as the one who has brought dishonour. In fact, the power dynamics in place often shield perpetrators, who may be authority figures such as religious teachers or older relatives.

**Most boys grow up with the message that revealing abuse will only bring humiliation, suspicion, and long-term consequences to their social identity.** Even when opportunities arise to engage boys and youth in discussions on protection issues, many boys still feel unable to talk openly about their experiences. In recent years, a few boys have begun to disclose their experiences publicly, often on social media, and the response from the public has sometimes been supportive. This shows that attitudes may be slowly changing, especially among younger generations. Some boys now feel slightly more able to share, and some practitioners working in psychosocial services have noted that boys are occasionally more willing to talk about harm they have experienced during counselling sessions. But these disclosures are fragile and often blocked by family members, who may still prioritise silence over healing.

Because of these challenges, the CRG-PPA has developed **cautious and culturally sensitive ways of working with boys.** They do not push boys into public speaking roles or media engagement, recognising the risks involved. Instead, they have focused on building trust through confidential interviews, always protecting the anonymity of the boys.

One approach that has worked well for them in this context is what they describe as a “snowball” method: starting with one boy who agrees to share his experience privately, then asking if he knows others who might be willing to speak as well. This has allowed them to gather meaningful testimonies while keeping the boys safe and respected. Still, the broader environment remains hostile. Survivor-led networks or spaces for boy and youth survivors of sexual abuse do not yet exist in Pakistan.

**5)**

## Child labour in the transport sector

In many parts of Pakistan, child labour in the transport sector is widespread but often overlooked. Many boys work as apprentices for truck drivers or other vehicle operators. While this work may seem like a way to earn money or learn a job, it often hides serious forms of exploitation. These apprentices face harsh and dangerous working conditions, with long hours and little protection or support. Many are at risk of sexual abuse by their employers or others they encounter during their work, and they may feel forced to endure sexual abuse in exchange for protection, food, or to avoid punishment. Many of the adult drivers who exploit these boys were once apprentices themselves. Some endured similar abuse in their childhood, and replicated the same behaviour with boys under their supervision. As seen in *madrasas*, this creates a cycle of abuse where the victimisation of boys becomes internalised, normalised, and repeated.

**6)**

## Runaway boys and trafficking

Many boys leave their homes voluntarily to escape violence, abuse or exploitation they experience within their family and home environment, their departure is often a response to difficult or dysfunctional family situations. These boys commonly travel alone, using buses or trains to leave their hometowns in search of safety or a better life.

However, once they begin travelling alone, they may fall under the control of criminal networks that are skilled at finding and targeting runaway boys for exploitation. At major bus and train stations, these boys are often approached by traffickers who offer them shelter or assistance. The methods used by these traffickers are highly organised and sophisticated, designed to exploit the extreme vulnerability that boys experience immediately after leaving home. After accepting the offer of shelter, the boys are typically subjected to repeated sexual exploitation. The initial traffickers usually keep the boys for several days before handing them over to other groups involved in the exploitation cycle. This cycle continues, with boys being passed from one group to another.

Over time, many boys come to see exploitation in prostitution<sup>5</sup> as a way to regain **some control over their situation**. They may feel that choosing when, how, or with whom to engage gives them at least a minimal sense of agency, even though they remain trapped within an exploitative and abusive environment.

In recent years, the exploitation of boys in prostitution in Pakistan has become increasingly organised and linked to criminal gangs operating in various regions. The Kasur scandal, which came to light in 2015, shows the scale this can reach, uncovering a network that abused and exploited around 300 children, mostly boys. The children were coerced into sexual acts while

<sup>5</sup> Children under the age of 18 who are involved in prostitution should always be seen and addressed as victims or survivors of sexual exploitation. For more info: Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2025). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Section E.

filmed in Kasur, a town south of Lahore in Punjab province. This produced about 400 videos of child sexual abuse. The criminals then used these videos as leverage, blackmailing both the children and their families to either create more material or stay silent about what had happened. The videos were sold locally and distributed through illegal online networks.

The police investigation exposed the high level of organised crime behind this operation, revealing the threats and violence used to maintain this profitable system of exploitation. It also revealed how the community became complicit, the case was silenced due to the alleged involvement of one of the ruling party's member of the parliament. When the recommendations were presented to the Law Minister, he dismissed them and promised a new inquiry, which was never formed. Following this, the [National Commission For Human Rights](#) conducted a fact-finding report on the case.<sup>6</sup> The Government of Punjab then formed a high-level committee to develop long-term solutions to child sexual abuse and exploitation. This committee included representatives from various departments, as well as civil society organisations such as PAHCHAAN and UNICEF. Their task was to recommend effective measures to combat these issues.

However, before the committee's report could be published, it had to be reviewed by the Punjab's Law Minister, which refused to accept the reality of the scandal, claiming media reports were disinformation fuelled by Western agendas.<sup>7</sup> While his stance created friction and diverted attention toward questioning whether the crimes had occurred, rather than focusing on prevention and response, the police and medical evidence were solid and could not be denied. The presentation included all key evidence and had been vetted by all members of the committee, and it was only refuted by the Law Minister. Ultimately, the report drafted by PAHCHAAN and UNICEF was rejected due to concerns that it would bring shame and dishonour to the communities involved. As a result, no final report was issued, beyond the initial fact-finding.

In another incident in December 2024, media attention focused on a gang that abducted 29 boys in Lahore and trafficked them to Kashmir. The traffickers recruited these boys through promises of employment opportunities. Upon arrival in Kashmir, the boys were subjected to multiple forms of exploitation, including forced labour, trafficking and sexual abuse. This exploitation lasted for more than two years, when the boys were finally returned to Lahore, PAHCHAAN provided psychosocial support to them and their families.

This case shocked the public because it revealed a different and previously overlooked pattern of trafficking. Unlike the more commonly known routes, this involved boys being moved from urban to rural areas, into a highly organised system of exploitation at the destination. The boys faced both child labour and sexual exploitation, highlighting a disturbing trend that had long gone unrecognised.

<sup>6</sup> National Commission for Human Rights, Government of Pakistan (2015). [The Kasur Incident of Child Abuse: Fact Finding Report](#).

<sup>7</sup> References to "Western agendas" often reflect a perception among some policymakers and community leaders that international attention to child sexual abuse is driven by foreign values or political interests that may conflict with local cultural or religious norms. In this context, accusations of promoting Western agendas were used to delegitimise media coverage and external pressure, framing them as culturally insensitive or as attempts to impose foreign narratives on Pakistani society.

## Field visit highlights safety concerns

Team members recall that while they were often questioned or criticised, they rarely felt personally unsafe. The one major exception occurred in 2002, when a small team from PAHCHAAN and Vision visited a public park in Lahore to follow up on reports of boys being exploited by criminal rings. During this visit coordinated with the police, they encountered several boys, including one who had been assaulted just hours earlier and was visibly traumatised. When a group of men approached the team and began questioning their presence, it became clear that someone with local power was protecting the exploitation. The team quickly left the area with the boy and was met by the police, who escorted them out after a stop at the local security office. It was a stark reminder of the risks involved, even for those acting within formal systems.

This experience did not deter the group. Instead, it reinforced their understanding of how deeply rooted the issue was, and how important it was to continue working strategically and carefully to bring it to light.



# BREAKING THE SILENCE

a)

## How early data and alliances helped break the silence

In the late 1990s, the CRG-PPA began taking steps to document the sexual exploitation of children, an issue which until then had been largely invisible in national discourse.<sup>8</sup> This work unfolded in a context of silence, social discomfort, and institutional denial. Yet through a combination of careful data gathering and strategic coalition-building, the CRG-PPA was able to give visibility and legitimacy to an issue that many preferred to ignore.

In 1996, a CRG-PPA member joined the official Pakistani delegation to the First World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm. The Congress called on all governments to carry out national situational analysis to support the implementation of the [Agenda for Action](#) adopted in Stockholm. In response, the CRG-PPA led Pakistan's first ever attempt to document the sexual exploitation of children in a systematic way. The effort was modest in scale but groundbreaking in its ambition. Conducted between 1997 and 1999 with no external funding, the study was supported by internal CRG-PPA resources, pro bono legal advice, and strategic partnerships, particularly with Sahil, an organisation monitoring over 60 media outlets for cases of child sexual abuse, and Save the Children Sweden, which provided technical guidance.

The report was published in early 2000 and focused primarily on Lahore, including direct interviews with boys involved in street-based and brothel-based exploitation. Despite the report's limited geographic scope, it provided some of the first concrete evidence of the scale and forms of child sexual exploitation in Pakistan. However, this breakthrough came with immediate backlash; some government officials accused the CRG-PPA of exaggeration. In meetings, authorities sought to minimise or reframe the findings as isolated or exceptional. With no prior national data available, the report's conclusions appeared disruptive, even threatening, to prevailing narratives about childhood, morality, and masculinity.

The response from the media was mixed; on the one hand, the study received national attention, giving the issue visibility. On the other, many headlines sensationalised the content, focusing on shocking details while ignoring the report's methodology or structural analysis. This created public confusion and weakened the perceived credibility of the findings.

The report's release coincided with a national event: in December 1999, a man named Javed Iqbal confessed to sexually abusing and murdering approximately 100 boys in Lahore.<sup>9</sup> His

8 ECPAT International (2006). [Global Monitoring – Pakistan: Report on the status of action against commercial sexual exploitation of children](#). The term “commercial sexual exploitation of children” has been replaced by the broader term “sexual exploitation of children”, for more information: Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2025). [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#). Section D.

9 Jason Burke (7 December 1999). [Confessions back suicide note claims of child killings](#). *The Guardian*.

arrest and trial dominated media coverage and shocked the public. The publication of the CRG-PPA report just months later meant that it entered a public space already primed by grief and outrage. This convergence, while tragic, gave the CRG-PPA an unexpected entry point, the issue of sexual violence against boys, previously dismissed, could no longer be ignored entirely.

Through joint advocacy, the coalition engaged with government stakeholders and helped convince the National Commission for Child Welfare and Development (now the National Commission on the Rights of the Child) to endorse the plan. Although initial resistance persisted, the coalition's persistence paid off, the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Human Rights in the Pakistani delegation to the 2001 Yokohama Congress showed that the government was beginning to recognise the seriousness of the issue and the legitimacy of the civil society stakeholders involved.

By 2007, the National Plan of Action was officially adopted by the Federal Cabinet.<sup>10</sup> What began as a risky, underfunded effort by a small group of paediatricians had evolved into a broader national response, thanks in large part to the strategic alliances that gave the work credibility, safety, and reach. The early experience of the CRG-PPA in Pakistan is an example of how **evidence production in contested spaces also represents a political act.**

The CRG-PPA has learned over time that progress in child protection rarely comes through immediate public commitments or rapid shifts following a high-profile incident. Instead, **meaningful change often occurs gradually through long processes of advocacy, dialogue, and systems building.** The CRG-PPA has developed a practice of measuring impact not only by what happens in the spotlight, but also by what follows in its aftermath, such as new legislation, programme development, or policy shifts that emerge when political conditions are more favourable.

One important insight is that pressuring authorities to act immediately after a crisis or public scandal may risk further harm to affected communities, as seen in the case of protests. The CRG-PPA is careful to weigh this risk and instead looks for moments when the government can take leadership at its own pace, without appearing to respond under pressure from civil society organisations. Many child protection laws in Pakistan have been introduced as a reaction to public outrage following high-profile cases or in response to international pressure. These laws are often drafted hastily, leaving loopholes and suffering from weak implementation. However, even if not comprehensive, they have helped to break institutional silence, and lay a legal foundation for continued work and reform. For example, in 2016 the revision of the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act and the adoption of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, which defined child sexual abuse and introduced penalties for the first time, were passed in response to pressure from civil society. The CRG-PPA played a direct role in these efforts, because this shift was not spontaneous, it followed over a decade of sustained engagement and advocacy from the CRG-PPA and other civil society stakeholders. Advocacy for boys' protection from sexual violence requires endurance and the willingness to work through setbacks, waiting for the right moment to turn long-term investment into structural reform.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Social Welfare and Special Education, National Commission for Child Welfare and Development (NCCWD), Government of Pakistan (2006). [National Plan of Action for Children](#).

**b)**

## Stories as a form of evidence

The CRG-PPA quickly realised that traditional quantitative data would never be enough to make a compelling case for the protection of boys. Available statistics are limited in scope, often only covering reported cases, and many data systems remain fragmented and unreliable. These numbers, while useful in some contexts, do not reflect the full scale or complexity of sexual exploitation and abuse affecting boys in Pakistan.

Instead, the CRG-PPA and PAHCHAAN found that **stories, individual case histories drawn from their clinical and community-based work, offered the most powerful form of evidence**. These stories bring to life the roots behind the abuse, the way it manifests, and its impact on boy, as well as the kinds of responses that can make a difference. Each case is different, each boy has his own story, and together, these accounts form a mosaic that helps practitioners, policymakers, and the public better understand the reality of sexual exploitation and the urgent need for action.

These stories often emerge naturally from the services the CRG-PPA and PAHCHAAN already provide in hospitals and communities. While some data and qualitative studies have been published, most of these stories remain in their internal records, unshared due to a lack of dedicated resources to turn them into structured research or advocacy materials. Yet, even without large-scale studies, the organisations have found ways to use stories informally, in training, policy dialogue, and internal reflection.

For the CRG-PPA, this represents a shift in what counts as knowledge. Stories have been experiential evidence that reflect the lived realities of boys and **while quantitative research is important, impactful advocacy can also grow from listening closely to boys, documenting their experiences, and connecting those experiences to a broader call for change**.

**c)**

## Public recognition and credibility

When the CRG-PPA began openly addressing the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys, they encountered significant resistance from the communities. Some religious leaders accused them of promoting sin and encouraging immorality simply for naming the problem. There was institutional hesitation: speaking about such issues publicly was seen as socially provocative, and there were also violent protests.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this pushback, CRG-PPA's position as medical professionals and paediatricians working through a national, respected association provided them credibility. They were seen as protectors of children's health, not political activists, which helped lower suspicion. This identity also gave

<sup>11</sup> For more information, see page 17, "Public protest over report findings".

them access to decision-makers and people with authority, who were more willing to engage with medical professionals.

The CRG-PPA's credibility was further enhanced by several prestigious awards and recognitions that the group received over the years. Notably, in 2006, CRG-PPA was honoured with the "Best Multi-disciplinary Team Award" by ISPCAN, acknowledging the group's effective collaborative approach to child protection. This recognition helped validate CRG-PPA's work in the eyes of policymakers, practitioners, and the public, empowering the group to speak more openly and confidently about the challenges of sexual exploitation and the importance of protecting boys. Additionally, these recognitions served to motivate and unify the members of the CRG-PPA, reinforcing their commitment to continue advancing child rights despite social and institutional challenges. The group's growing legitimacy was crucial in gaining the trust and support needed to influence policy and practice at both national and regional levels.

### Public protest over report findings

The Child Rights Group of the Pakistan Paediatric Association recalled, in the aftermath of the release of the second situational analysis, that a prominent national media published a feature article with detailed account on the content of the report. The article was clearly bringing a lot of attention on the situational analysis, but it was done again with a sensationalist perspective, even provoking the population in the way the data was presented.

Luckily, the article did not mention the authors of the report, which means the CRG-PPA team was not the object of direct attention.

But a group of angry protesters surrounded the offices of the newspaper the day it was published, demanding to have access to the journalist. It was found later that the journalist had secured asylum with his entire family in a European Embassy in Pakistan the day prior to the publishing of the article, raising questions about the real intention of the journalist behind the release of such a provoking article. The mob moved on a few hours after, putting a rapid end to this spontaneous violent protest.

Furthermore, the CRG-PPA's advocacy efforts led to the government's decision to show leadership by including Pakistan in the global prevalence study [Disrupting Harm](#).<sup>12</sup> Like many countries, the CRG-PPA has observed a major shift in how boys are sexually exploited and abused, largely driven by the rise of technology. Those who exploit boys are no longer limited to their immediate circle of trust. [Data](#) from the [National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children](#) shows millions of online searches for child sexual abuse material originating from Pakistan,

<sup>12</sup> Disrupting Harm is a multi-country research study funded by Safe Online and implemented by ECPAT International, INTERPOL and UNICEF Innocenti-Global Office of Research and Foresight. It aims at generating evidence on technology-facilitated child sexual exploitation and abuse in 25 countries across 6 regions.

mostly related to the production of such material. Yet, regulations on this issue are almost non-existent, and the country's ability to address the link between technology and sexual exploitation is still very limited.

In response, the CRG-PPA and PAHCHAAN worked closely with the National Commission on the Rights of the Child to include Pakistan in the second wave of countries covered by the Disrupting Harm project. This success highlighted the importance of staying alert to global developments and opportunities and being proactive in bringing them to their country to effect real change.

Another major source of credibility that enabled the CRG-PPA to continue its work advocating for the protection of boys against sexual exploitation was its active involvement in several regional and international networks, including organisations such as ECPAT International, [ISPCAN](#), the [Asia Pacific Paediatric Association](#) and the International Paediatric Association. Through these collaborations, the CRG-PPA not only strengthened its reputation within Pakistan but also gained access to important data, research, and case studies from other countries. This broader perspective was instrumental in framing the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of children within a global context, helping the group develop more effective and informed strategies.

Participation in these networks also provided the CRG-PPA with opportunities for knowledge exchange and capacity strengthening. The support from and partnership with these international actors helped the group build trust with local stakeholders, including government authorities, health professionals, and communities.

Funding limitations and shrinking civil society spaces are common challenges across South Asia. The CRG-PPA found that working in isolation is ineffective; paediatricians alone cannot solve these complex issues. From the start, the organisation involved other organisations in their efforts, moving from a small group of five or six organisations working on child sexual exploitation in Pakistan to dozens today. **This collaboration helped decentralise capacity and strengthen local engagement.**

Around 2010, when engaging with justice sector personnel (judges, prosecutors, lawyers) there was little interest or credibility given to their message. Society was not willing to recognise the issue's importance or everyone's role in addressing it. Over time, attitudes shifted because of the work of PAHCHAAN, Konpal and HELP, who have engaged non-medical professionals through training sessions, lectures, and provincial symposia. The Annual and Biennial Conferences of the Pakistan Paediatric Association have also provided a platform to bring together professionals from different sectors, including legal actors, social workers, nurses and psychologists, around the topic of child abuse and neglect. While these discussions address all forms of abuse, the sexual exploitation of boys often takes centre stage due to its severity. Justice personnel now view these organisations as credible partners. Moreover, although paediatricians initially struggled to engage with these issues, they have since taken greater responsibility and are now recognised as trusted and respected professionals in this field.

d)

## Building the case internally

Historically, paediatricians in Pakistan did not see the sexual exploitation of children as part of their professional responsibility. Many leaders within the Pakistan Paediatric Association initially believed that other professionals, such as social workers or judges, were better suited to address this issue. It took considerable time and effort to gradually build awareness and engagement from a public health perspective.

The first attempt to bring this topic into the Association's discussions was at a side-event on child sexual exploitation during the annual meeting in 1990, which was attended by only four or five paediatricians. In 1993, a group of child rights advocates within the Pakistan Paediatric Association made a second attempt, this time by reframing the discussion around child protection and the clinical role paediatricians play in diagnosing children exposed to abuse. This new approach worked well because more paediatricians began attending and discussing the issue with their peers, generating momentum.

While the Pakistan Paediatric Association never actively obstructed the CRG-PPA efforts, it did not initially provide formal support or resources to prioritise the issue. Over time, as the organisation gained experience, it became easier to connect their work directly to the paediatric mandate, using language focused on trauma, abuse, mental health, and the physical effects of sexual exploitation on children.

In 2009, PAHCHAAN and CRG-PPA established South Asia's [first Hospital-Based Child Protection Unit](#) at Children's Hospital Lahore. This unit provided medical, surgical, and psychological care to abused and neglected children, along with social and legal support to their families. In partnership with UNICEF and the Government of Punjab, these Hospital Child Protection Units have since expanded to 20 districts in Punjab and the Islamabad Capital Territory, linked to newly established Child Protection Centres under the Child Protection and Welfare Bureau. The CRG-PPA is also working with UNICEF to establish similar units in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

Hospital data indicate that 8.3% of reported cases involve child sexual abuse and exploitation.<sup>13</sup> To strengthen the response, PAHCHAAN and the CRG-PPA have collaborated with the University of Child Health Sciences Lahore to develop a pool of young paediatricians who serve as focal persons and master trainers in these district-level Child Protection Units, increasing their interest and expertise in this field.

One particularly promising model developed by the CRG-PPA is the creation of informal "spoke hubs" within hospitals. These hubs bring together medical and social professionals to share recent research and discuss the latest trends related to the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and girls. Paediatricians form the core of these groups and often convene colleagues from other departments. This approach has been especially successful in engaging younger professionals.

<sup>13</sup> Zafar, N., Naeem, M., Zehra, A. and Khalid, M. (2020). [Ten Year Data of Child Abuse and Neglect Cases Managed at the First Hospital Based Child Protection Unit in Pakistan](#). Asia Pacific Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health, 3.

The hubs also serve as spaces to identify trainers and gather feedback on draft handbooks and other resources.

By 2017, the CRG-PPA expanded its focus to include prevention, covering topics such as parenting skills, early childhood development, preventive public health, and social paediatric theories. This broadened approach attracted more members to become actively involved.

A major milestone came in 2017 when PAHCHAAN and the CRG-PPA jointly hosted the [first South Asia Regional Conference on Child Rights](#) in Lahore. The event drew over 1,500 participants and significantly boosted the CRG-PPA's credibility and influence within the Pakistan Paediatric Association. It also helped mobilise a younger generation of paediatricians, who initially engaged with general child protection concepts and gradually became interested in more challenging issues such as sexual exploitation and the specific risks for boys.

This progressive, inclusive strategy has allowed the CRG-PPA to remain flexible, grow its membership, and lower the average age of its active members, ensuring sustained momentum in addressing sexual exploitation and child protection more broadly.

### **Studies on the sexual exploitation of children in Pakistan that include specific sections covering the situation of boys**

#### **Year**

<b>2000:</b>	<a href="#">Confronting Reality: Perceptions and Incidence of Child Sexual Abuse in Pakistan</a>
<b>2005:</b>	<a href="#">Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Situation Analysis of Pakistan</a> – Working Group Against Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation and Save the Children Sweden.
<b>2006:</b>	<a href="#">Situational Analysis Report on Prostitution of Boys in Pakistan (Lahore &amp; Peshawar)</a> – ECPAT International and Pakistan Paediatrics Association.
<b>2006:</b>	<a href="#">Global Monitoring – Pakistan: Report on the status of action against commercial sexual exploitation of children.</a>
<b>2006:</b>	<a href="#">National Plan of Action for Children.</a>
<b>2009:</b>	<a href="#">Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: A Situation Analysis of Transport Industry of Pakistan (2009)</a> – Working Group Against Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation and Save the Children Sweden.
<b>2022:</b>	<a href="#">Global Boys Initiative: Pakistan Report (2022)</a> – ECPAT International and PAHCHAAN.

# LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR ADVOCACY

a)

## Engaging with the media

The CRG-PPA has witnessed important changes in social attitudes and norms regarding the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys over the past decades. During the 2000s, media coverage in Pakistan was largely sensationalist and harmful. Reports often blamed the survivors, violated confidentiality, and focused attention on the boys rather than on the perpetrators, underlying causes, or the country's responsibility.

Recognising this problem, starting in 2006 and with support from [Group Development Pakistan](#), [ECPAT Luxembourg](#) and [DCI ECPAT Netherlands](#), the CRG-PPA began raising awareness among mainstream media professionals about ethical reporting, including language guidelines, how to report cases, and the use of images. This led to significant improvements, including the introduction of a media code of conduct still used by some media in 2025.

However, the rapid growth of local newspapers, radio stations, television channels, and social media platforms has diluted these advances. Many current reports remain insensitive, particularly in cases involving boys, and there is little monitoring or enforcement of ethical media practices. Despite this, media attention, whether responsible or sensationalist, has had an unexpected positive effect. Communities and families have become more protective of boys, limiting practices such as sending them alone on errands for an extended period of time, reflecting increased awareness of the risks boys face in terms of sexual violence.

Popular television dramas and movies now increasingly depict stories involving the sexual exploitation of boys, including the responses of families and communities. These portrayals seem to indicate a growing social willingness to confront these difficult issues.

Though some CRG-PPA members remain cautious about how much social norms are shifting, others have noted that suspicious behaviour by adult men around boys now raises more community questions than before; this growing vigilance suggests a redefinition of social attitudes.

**b)**

## Education in schools

In Pakistan, Life Skills-Based Education<sup>14</sup> (LSBE) has been introduced to a small group of children as an effective way to teach them important aspects of personal relationships and safety without labelling these lessons as formal sex education, which remains a sensitive and often controversial topic. This approach allows educators and community workers to address sensitive issues while still providing essential knowledge to children.

Key concepts included in LSBE are “good touch” and “bad touch.” These terms are taught often during school assemblies or through informal classroom activities. The goal is to help children recognise the difference between safe and appropriate touches and those that are harmful or abusive. By using simple language and age-appropriate explanations, children begin to understand what constitutes abuse and learn how to respond if they or someone they know is affected.

While these sessions are not yet delivered in a fully organised or systematic way across all schools, the organisation’s experience shows that some boys are internalising these key messages. They gain a better understanding of their rights to safety and bodily autonomy and are somewhat more prepared to seek help or report abuse when it happens.

This method respects the cultural context of Pakistan by avoiding direct discussion of sexuality related topics, instead focusing on personal safety and protection, which has allowed LSBE to gain some acceptance as a vital tool for child protection.

**c)**

## Adapting language for broader engagement

Over the decade that preceded the adoption of gender-neutral legislation in Pakistan, the CRG-PPA developed a strategic understanding of the power of language. A key learning was the importance of avoiding terminology that could trigger resistance and risk derailing much-needed reforms. By intentionally promoting gender-neutral concepts, terms, and principles in all matters related to child protection, the CRG-PPA found a way to build consensus and avoid unnecessary confrontation. This approach made it possible to frame child protection as a shared responsibility, one that relates to children equally, without having to specify or debate identities. It resonated particularly well with traditional and religious authorities and helped secure their support for recent legislative changes.

14 PAHCHAAN (N.A.). *Final Manual of Non Formal Education - Comprehensive Guide To Skills and Learning.*

The strategic use of language extended beyond legal advocacy; the CRG-PPA identified through experience that **it is often more effective to use broader, less confronting language to open conversations around sensitive issues:**

- Starting with life skills education instead of directly discussing sexuality or exploitation. This creates a space for initial conversation with boys and families.
- Introducing online safety education through the concept of cyberbullying, which serves as an entry point to explore power dynamics, peer relationships, and risks of abuse in digital spaces.
- Using commonly accepted topics like health, hygiene or nutrition to build trust in communities. These topics offer a bridge toward more sensitive protection issues over time, especially in a society where direct references to sexual exploitation can alienate key stakeholders.
- Adapting language for each audience, especially when engaging with donors or the media. Knowing when and how to speak about the issue is a critical skill for navigating sensitive sociocultural landscapes.
- Avoiding sensational or overly direct terms can make discussions more constructive and acceptable. For example, in Urdu, many words related to abuse and exploitation do not translate easily or carry heavy connotations. This presents both challenges and opportunities, particularly the chance to adopt a more nuanced language that still opens the door to meaningful conversations.



# WORKING WITH INSTITUTIONS

a)

## Engaging policymakers

One important lesson the CRG-PPA learned from their experience is the need to involve policymakers early when developing and promoting laws and to address the sexual exploitation of boys. Initially, they tended to avoid or delay engaging key decision-makers during critical moments. As a result, when laws and policies were eventually introduced, frontline workers only started to change their practices afterwards. Often, policymakers only engaged with the issue after public pressure pushed it into the spotlight, rather than being actively brought in by civil society organisations.

The development of the National Plan of Action was a major milestone, providing a clear roadmap for addressing child sexual exploitation. However, it took nearly ten years after the First World Congress on this topic to reach that point. This delay was partly because the CRG-PPA was learning as they went and had not yet developed a clear engagement strategy or cultivated relationships with legislators, politicians, and local decision-makers early on. Today, CRG-PPA recognises the growing influence of key individuals and influencers who can drive change, and they see early engagement with such stakeholders as essential for progress.

Closely linked to early engagement is the patience needed to navigate staff turnover and difficult relationships. PAHCHAAN recalled a challenging experience with the Child Protection Welfare Bureau, where collaboration was initially very difficult. At one point, the Bureau even raided the organisation's Street Boys Shelter, because the Punjab Destitute and Neglected Children Act required the children to be kept overnight only through court custody, whereas PAHCHAAN was running a 24-hour open-door shelter. After that raid, the shelter became a day-only drop-in centre, but due to the lack of impact and recognising that productive dialogue was impossible at that time, PAHCHAAN decided to close down the project. Later, when new leadership took over, the Bureau became much more open and welcoming. This example shows that while working with powerful institutions can be sensitive and complex, it is important to choose battles wisely and focus on entry points that can lead to meaningful results.

The CRG-PPA shared a similar experience with a sceptical lawmaker. Despite initial resistance, they persisted through multiple meetings and dialogues. Over time, they gained their support, and they became one of the most influential parliamentarians advocating for legislation to protect boys and girls from sexual exploitation.

**b)**

## Treat very carefully with religious authorities

Religious leaders hold significant influence in Pakistani society and can play a critical role in supporting child protection initiatives. Engaging with them requires a thoughtful and respectful approach, especially when discussing sensitive topics related to boys' safety and rights. Key learnings include:

- Use of culturally resonant language: instead of terms that may provoke resistance, such as "sexuality", "abuse", or "exploitation", the CRG-PPA uses language that aligns with religious and cultural values, for example, "protection", "prevention" "public health" "honour" and "children's rights". This framing helps build consensus and avoids confrontation.
- Instead of using terms that might cause discomfort or resistance, such as sexuality, abuse, or exploitation, the group frames its work around concepts that align better with religious and cultural values. These, as child protection is generally seen as a shared concern among different religious communities.
- Inclusion in dialogue spaces: the CRG-PPA actively meets with religious leaders on an individual basis. They invite them to participate in meetings and conferences to increase understanding and support.
- Ongoing dialogue: these sustained interactions help strengthen trust and encourage religious leaders to actively support child protection, while respecting cultural and religious sensitivities.

A key asset in this engagement is that one CRG-PPA's paediatricians is also a respected religious scholar and leader. This dual role helps bridge the gap between the medical and religious communities, as his office serves as a trusted point of contact for religious leaders interested in child protection issues.

**c)**

## Collaborating with the police

The CRG-PPA recognises that engaging with the police has been a gradual but important journey over the past 25 years. In the early days, the relationship between law enforcement and boys, especially boys living on the street, was often marked by fear and mistrust. For example, some street boy would experience distress or flashbacks simply upon seeing police officers wearing broad-toe shoes or hearing shouting voices, as these reminded them of past negative encounters with the Child Protection Welfare Bureau.

Over time, through persistent efforts involving extensive training, relationship-building, and collaborative work, there has been a notable shift. The police and other law enforcement authorities, including members of the judiciary, have begun to change their attitudes towards boys, moving from scepticism and denial to acknowledgement and proactive engagement. This shift has been observed through reports of abused children seeking help in hospitals, as well as through insights shared by justice professionals and frontline workers in the field. However, research on how boys currently feel about the police is not available, and according to PAHCHAAN, there is still probably a sense of scepticism among boys toward the police to some extent.

**Police forces no longer deny the reality or extent of sexual exploitation and abuse affecting boys.** Instead, they act as responsive partners who focus on prevention and support rather than debating the issue itself. Law enforcement officers now participate in delivering prevention messages and raising awareness about their legal obligations to protect, report, and support survivors.

The CRG-PPA recommends adopting a patient, long-term strategy also when engaging with the police. This approach acknowledges that real change is not just about shifting language or official statements, but about transforming the culture within law enforcement bodies. It involves guiding officers in how they relate to and protect boys, helping to create a safer environment for boys at risk under their mandate.

**d)**

## Improving child protection case management

Recently in the country, there has been more focus on child protection case management protocols and procedures as part of the process to decentralise services and improve their accessibility and quality. The recent changes introduced in the legislation regarding gender neutral approaches created an opportunity to constantly examine the way case management will unfold and ensure that boys are examined with their own dynamics in the way services are made accountable to them. It was seen by the CRG-PPA as an operational shift in their advocacy, moving away from the policy level to rather entering a new era of action where the protection of boys against sexual exploitation can take more concrete forms in the way practitioners are trained, equipped and guided in their work. This is seen as a game changer for boys in Pakistan, as it finally gives attention to the obligations of services to align their practices to be accountable for the way they provide prevention and response care to boys. It is worth noting that there is no mandatory reporting obligation in Pakistan for adults or professionals who are made aware of a boy being exposed to violence, abuse, exploitation or neglect.

## HUMAN AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES

One of the most persistent challenges faced by the CRG-PPA has been overcoming deeply ingrained societal attitudes that blame boys for the sexual abuse and exploitation they suffer. Victim blaming is widespread across multiple sectors, including parenting, media, education, judicial processes, and traditional social systems. In Pakistan, boys who experience abuse are often presumed to have provoked it. For example, a common initial question from parents or authorities is, “*What were you doing?*”, reflecting a lack of full trust in the boy’s account and implying responsibility on the boy’s part.

While the CRG-PPA has not yet found ways to fully overcome these attitudes at the societal level, it has taken steps to address victim blaming through targeted training programmes. These programmes are designed to equip psychosocial workers and other professionals with skills to engage with boys in ways that do not perpetuate blame or stigma.

Over the past few years, PAHCHAAN has trained more than 3,000 healthcare professionals, psychologists, and frontline workers through three main categories of training:

1. Case management and referral systems for child abuse and neglect cases: Training focuses on how to identify, manage, and refer cases properly, emphasising a child-centred approach that protects boys’ rights and dignity.
2. Mental health and psychosocial support and psychological first aid: This training is provided to psychologists and frontline workers to help them address the mental and emotional needs of boys who have experienced abuse, including how to listen and respond without reinforcing victim blaming.
3. Training for care providers in alternative care institutions: This aims to ensure that boys in institutional care receive appropriate protection and support, with attention to confidentiality and sensitivity.

These trainings are hands-on and practical, and are delivered to government workers in hospitals, the Child Protection Welfare Bureau, social welfare departments, prisons, and alternative care institutions.

Key topics covered include the prevention and management of child abuse and neglect, psychological aspects of trauma, techniques for interviewing boys sensitively, maintaining confidentiality, and avoiding language that implies blame or suspicion toward the boy.

**i)**

## Supporting civil society organisations and child protection initiatives

The CRG-PPA believes that real leadership in child protection requires leading by example. Therefore, they consistently work to align their own initiatives with existing laws, policies, and national programmes, while encouraging the broader civil society sector to do the same. To support this alignment, the CRG-PPA has delivered targeted training sessions for civil society organisations, including community-based groups working on child rights. These trainings focus on key frameworks such as the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), helping organisations understand and apply legal and policy standards in their work. In parallel, the CRG-PPA organises biennial national conferences that bring together diverse stakeholders to exchange experiences, strengthen knowledge, and build collective capacity on child protection issues.

The CRG-PPA also holds itself to the same standards it promotes. This is evident in its longstanding commitment to child participation: during public events and advocacy initiatives, the organisation ensures that boys are given meaningful and respectful space to express their views. When conducting research involving boys, the CRG-PPA applies rigorous safeguarding protocols to protect participants' safety, dignity, and mental well-being.

PAHCHAAN has translated many of these principles into local-level practice. Working through community-run schools and organisations, PAHCHAAN has established School and Community Child Protection Committees in 19 districts of Punjab. These committees receive ongoing support through WhatsApp groups, regular review meetings, and technical guidance. Their work focuses on promoting safeguarding, preventing abuse and neglect, and ensuring timely referrals to Hospital Child Protection Units when needed.

PAHCHAAN has also been accredited by UNICEF as meeting the Prevention of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Harassment (PSEAH) standards. As a certified trainer, the organisation now helps build the capacity of other actors in the field to meet these standards, in order to reinforce a culture of accountability and protection across the child rights sector in Pakistan.

**ii)**

## Sustaining capacity strengthening efforts by working on training curricula for new recruits

One key lesson for the CRG-PPA has been that relying solely on occasional training sessions is insufficient. These ad hoc trainings often depend on external funding, which is inconsistent, and the organisation does not have the capacity to deliver them across the country on a regular basis.

In response, the CRG-PPA has recently shifted its strategy. Instead of focusing on one-off workshops, it is now working to **embed comprehensive training on the sexual exploitation of children, highlighting the specific risks for boys, directly into the official curricula of universities**. This approach is more sustainable and realistic and ensures that future health professionals receive consistent and structured education on the issue as part of their formal studies.

So far, this strategy has led to progress. With the support of PAHCHAAN, the CRG-PPA has successfully introduced this content into the nursing curriculum in Lahore and the postgraduate paediatrics training at Rawalpindi Medical University.

However, the majority of medical and nursing schools in Pakistan still do not include this issue in their regular training programmes. Most remain dependent on short-term, donor-funded courses, often delivered by NGOs or external experts. This means that many health professionals continue to graduate without any preparation to recognise, respond to, or even talk about the sexual exploitation of boys.

This ongoing gap reveals a larger problem: despite official statements and commitments, public institutions have yet to fully take ownership of this issue. Until state authorities actively integrate this content into mandatory national curricula, meaningful progress will remain limited.



## CONCLUSIONS

The CRG-PPA's experience in addressing sexual abuse and exploitation of boys highlights the complexity and sensitivity of this issue within Pakistan, both due to socio-cultural norms and the institutional landscape. Despite persistent challenges such as taboos, victim-blaming, institutional resistance, and political hesitancy, these organisations have made significant progress in breaking the silence and advancing child protection over the years.

Several key lessons emerge from their work. First, meaningful and sustainable change requires patience and long-term commitment. Early efforts to document abuse and to raise awareness often faced backlash, but over time, these challenges helped build credibility, particularly thanks to the professional authority of paediatricians. Second, the use of personal narratives, such as the stories of individual boys, was effective when data were not available, as they conveyed the urgency of the issue and mobilised support. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including health professionals, law enforcement, religious leaders, media, and policymakers, has been essential to create momentum for change. Also reinforced by the use of culturally sensitive language that reduced resistance and enabled dialogue.

Still, many challenges remain, because the sexual exploitation of boys continues to be under-recognised in national policy, under-reported in public discourse, and not prioritised in professional training. Progress depends greatly on the willingness of institutions to acknowledge the issue and respond with sustained and systemic reforms.

The story of the CRG-PPA and the partner organisations is based on persistence, care, and strategic navigation. It shows that even in constrained settings, it is possible to open up new conversations and begin to shift harmful gender norms and rigid gender roles.

## TO DELVE DEEPER INTO THIS

To find out more about the Child Rights Group of Pakistan Paediatric Association's work in Pakistan and about their approach and services, please visit:  
<https://www.facebook.com/ChildRightsGroupPPA/>

To better understand the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and ECPAT International's work on this issue worldwide, please visit:  
<https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/>

To learn from other practitioners around the world about their work with boys:  
<https://ecpat.org/story/global-boys-initiative-case-studies/>

To learn more about the global work on sexual violence against boys, please visit the website of the Global Alliance for the Protection of Boys from Sexual Violence (GAPB):  
<https://www.wearegapb.org/>



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