

Framing Child Abuse: Analyzing Media Coverage of CSA in Lahore's Newspapers (2020-2023)

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ABSTRACT

Media coverage significantly influences public understanding and policy responses to child abuse. This study examines the portrayal of child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse (CSA), in Lahore's newspapers from 2020 to 2023. Findings reveal distinct patterns in coverage frequency, framing, and narrative presentation across English and Urdu newspapers. The analysis highlights issues such as sensationalism, lack of sensitivity, and politicization. Despite these challenges, media coverage remains essential for raising awareness and fostering societal dialogue on child protection. The study emphasizes the need for ethical reporting practices, improved journalist training, and stronger collaboration between media, government, and civil society to effectively address child abuse.

1. Introduction

The media has played a crucial role in increasing society's understanding of child abuse and neglect. This has been achieved primarily through continuous news coverage and features focusing on individual cases, research findings, and intervention efforts rather than targeted community education campaigns (Kosher & Ben, 2020). Recently, there has been a shift towards analyzing how the media covers topics related to child welfare, with scholars, academics, and professionals examining this coverage (Habib et al., 2023). The media has significantly shaped societal perceptions of "normal" and "deviant" behavior and what constitutes child abuse. At times, the media has appeared to have a greater influence on child protection policy and practice than field professionals. The media's coverage, analysis, and intervention in news stories about child sexual abuse (CSA) increase public awareness and bring attention to the issue in political and societal contexts (Jabeen, 2020).

Media coverage is crucial for explaining the importance of child protection and safeguarding policies and services. This study analyzes how the media's coverage, portrayal, and advocacy roles contribute to initiating a dialogue on prevention to establish a collective responsibility for children's public safety (Shah, 2020). It helps comprehend the social and cultural changes happening in society, particularly in Pakistan's media, and how these changes allow alternative care organizations to focus on larger-scale issues. Media coverage is considered crucial for keeping public attention on children's issues in the political sphere and ensuring accountability

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in child protection services. However, the way the media presents child abuse and child protection can negatively impact children and their families (Kousar & Bhadra, 2022).

Despite the critical role of the media in raising awareness about child abuse, there is a gap in understanding how media framing influences societal responses and policy implementation, particularly in the context of Pakistani newspapers. This study addresses this gap by analyzing newspaper coverage of child sexual abuse in Lahore from 2020 to 2023, focusing on framing, tone, and narrative presentation.

2. Literature Review

Child abuse is a pervasive issue that has escalated globally, affecting children in various settings such as homes, schools, markets, and businesses, regardless of their social class, group, religion, or gender (Ahmad & Khan, 2023). This literature review explores the different forms of child abuse, their repercussions, and the media's role in reporting and shaping public perception of child sexual abuse (CSA).

2.1. Forms of Child Abuse

2.1.1. Physical, Emotional, and Sexual Abuse

Physical abuse involves actions that result in a child being injured, such as hair-pulling or hitting (Ashraf, 2022). Neglect, a form of abuse, is characterized by failing to meet a child's physical and emotional needs. Emotional abuse includes actions that make individuals feel unloved, undervalued, and unwanted, such as insults and shouting. Sexual abuse encompasses behaviors like genital or oral contact, child exhibitionism, and child pornography (Nawaz et al., 2022).

2.2. Repercussions of Child Abuse

2.2.1. Psychological and Behavioral Effects

Child maltreatment can result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, low self-esteem, social dysfunction, interpersonal difficulties, high-risk behavior, suicide, and violence in adulthood (Ahmad, 2023). Bibi's (2023) study indicates that children who experience early abuse or neglect are more likely to exhibit behavior issues such as instability, despair, and aggressiveness.

2.2.2. Economic and Health Impacts

Child abuse also impacts economic well-being later in life (Waseem, 2020). Increased child maltreatment has a greater negative impact on the likelihood of employment in middle age, particularly for women. Child abuse significantly affects disease susceptibility and can hinder the effectiveness of treatment for mental disorders (Khan, 2020). Ahmad and Khan's (2023) study shows that stress and trauma from abuse are factors in the development of medical and psychiatric illnesses.

2.3. Media Coverage of Child Sexual Abuse

2.3.1. Challenges in Media Reporting

Media coverage of CSA has numerous problems, including sensationalism, stereotyping, and biased reporting, which can pose significant hazards to victims and survivors (Qadeer, 2023).

A study in Germany found that victims require thorough and forceful media coverage to bring attention to the issue and raise awareness in society (Khan et al., 2024).

2.3.2. Framing and Public Perception

Television news stories typically use episodic rather than thematic framing. Episodic framing focuses on individual experiences, while thematic framing places issues within a broader societal context, often attributing societal problems to individual responsibility (Cockbain, 2020). Social awareness and response to CSA are influenced by social debates involving various stakeholders, including victim and child advocate organizations, doctors, academics, legislators, policymakers, the media, and public speakers (Latif, 2020).

2.3.3. Parent-Sibling Communication and Prevention

There is less research on parent-sibling communication about the prevention of CSA. It is seldom clear what knowledge parents provide to their children about CSA and how to prevent it. Mothers tend to offer more information and engage in discussions about sexual assault prevention, particularly with their daughters (Nadeem et al., 2021).

2.4. Case Studies and Data

2.4.1. Children's Awareness and Self-Protection

Research at Muhammadiyah Elementary Schools in Pakistan found that children lacked the ability to distinguish between pleasant and unpleasant touching circumstances when assessing their self-protection knowledge against CSA. Only 50% of the respondents could recognize unfavorable touching circumstances and were also unable to report these incidents to their elders (Abbas et al., 2020).

2.4.2. Prevalence and Reporting

United Nations data indicate that CSA is a prevalent issue in Pakistan, largely unmonitored and rapidly escalating due to its sensitive nature (Rowther et al., 2020). Sarfraz (2020) concluded that media coverage of child molestation instances could impact policies and individuals' perspectives and actions on the matter. Media coverage raises awareness and encourages reporting of such incidents to authorities (Iqbal, 2021).

2.5. The Role of Media in Child Abuse Awareness

2.5.1. Impact on Public and Legal Responses

This study aims to examine the media's involvement in researching and reporting incidents of abuse against children. Media can enhance public awareness by providing precise and reliable information on cases of violence against children, enabling the public to understand the severity of the issue. Balanced media coverage might encourage law enforcement action by increasing pressure on agencies to address and prosecute perpetrators.

2.5.2. Challenges in Media Coverage

However, not all media coverage of CSA is reliable. Communication studies suggest that the media frequently provides inaccurate coverage of CSA. Understanding the principles of CSA will enable better public health outcomes within that framework. Media influences public perception through framing and agenda-setting, promoting specific interpretations and solutions (Atif, 2023; Nadeem et al., 2023).

The literature underscores the complex nature of child abuse and the significant role media plays in shaping public perception and policy responses. Further research is needed to bridge the gap between academic findings and media representations to enhance the accuracy and impact of media coverage on child abuse.

3. Research Questions

Q1: How frequently do newspapers in Lahore report on child sexual abuse cases??

Q2: How are child sexual abuse cases framed in English versus Urdu newspapers?

Q3: What are the dominant narratives and tones used in the reporting of child sexual abuse in Lahore's newspapers?

Q4: How does the framing of child sexual abuse in newspapers influence public perception and policy responses?

This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of media portrayal of child sexual abuse and its implications for public awareness and policy-making. By employing a qualitative content analysis methodology, the study examines the portrayal of child abuse, focusing on the strengths and shortcomings of media reporting. This analysis is crucial for developing ethical reporting practices, enhancing journalist training, and promoting collaboration between media, government, and civil society to effectively address child abuse.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the complexities and underlying themes in media coverage of child abuse cases in Lahore. The research utilizes a systematic content analysis approach to analyze news stories related to child abuse cases published in Lahore's newspapers.

4.2. Data Collection Process

4.2.1. Newspaper Selection and Time Frame

The study analyzed a total of 50 newspapers, comprising both Urdu and English language publications. The selection included 25 Urdu newspapers and 25 English newspapers to ensure a comprehensive analysis of media coverage across different linguistic and cultural contexts. The time frame of 2020-2023 was chosen for several reasons:

- **Recent Developments:** This period captures recent developments and trends in media reporting on child abuse.
- **Pandemic Influence:** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child abuse cases and media reporting is significant, as societal stressors and lockdown measures have influenced both the incidence and reporting of such cases.
- **Policy Changes:** Various policy changes and public awareness campaigns related to child protection were launched during this period, providing a relevant context for analyzing media coverage.

4.2.2. Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was conducted to ensure that the selected newspapers had a substantial readership and influence in Pakistan. The criteria for selection included:

- **Circulation Figures:** Newspapers with the highest circulation figures were chosen to ensure the study reflects widely consumed media content.
- **Geographical Representation:** Newspapers from different regions of Pakistan were included to capture regional variations in reporting.
- **Content Relevance:** Newspapers known for covering social issues and crime reports were prioritized to ensure relevant content for the study.

4.2.3. Coding Scheme

A detailed coding scheme was developed to systematically analyze various aspects of media reporting. The coding scheme includes the following main themes and sub-themes:

Table 1.
Coding Scheme

| Coding Main Theme | Sub Theme |
|-----------------------|---|
| Tone | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive• Neutral• Negative |
| Framing | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thematic• Episodic |
| Victim representation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sympathetic• Stigmatized |
| Language | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sensationalist• Sensitive |

Each news article was coded based on these themes to assess how child abuse cases were reported.

4.3. Coding Process

Two independent coders were involved in the coding process to ensure reliability and consistency. They analyzed each article according to the coding scheme, identifying the tone, framing, victim representation, and language used in the reporting. Any discrepancies between the coders were resolved through discussion and consensus.

4.4. Thematic Analysis

The coded data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, dominant narratives, and underlying biases in the media coverage. This involved grouping similar codes together to form broader themes and sub-themes, which provided deeper insights into how child abuse cases are portrayed in the media.

4.5. Research Variables

The primary research variables include:

- **Tone:** Refers to the overall sentiment of the article, categorized as positive, neutral, or negative.
- **Framing:** Describes whether the article presents the issue as a thematic (general context and broader societal issues) or episodic (specific incidents) narrative.

- **Victim Representation:** Examines how victims are portrayed, either sympathetically or stigmatized.
- **Language:** Analyzes the type of language used in reporting, whether it is sensationalist or sensitive.

4.6. Cultural Context and Language Sensitivity

The research also compares the tone and language of newspaper coverage in Urdu versus English. This comparison is based on the observation that Urdu newspapers tend to adopt a more harsh or sensationalist tone compared to English newspapers. Factors influencing this difference include:

- **Cultural Context:** Urdu, being the national language, reaches a broader segment of the population and might reflect more culturally ingrained attitudes.
- **Sensitivity to Language:** Differences in linguistic expressions between Urdu and English could result in varied emotional impacts.
- **Audience Perception:** The target audience's expectations might influence the reporting style.
- **Societal Factors:** Cultural norms and attitudes in Pakistani society can shape media coverage, with Urdu newspapers potentially reinforcing certain societal biases.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

All data collected from media sources were anonymized to protect the privacy and anonymity of individuals involved in documented child abuse incidents. As the study analyzes publicly accessible media content, obtaining express consent was unnecessary. However, ethical standards regarding fair use and source citation were strictly adhered to. Efforts were made to avoid re-victimization and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes while sharing study results. The study was conducted with sensitivity and respect towards victims of child abuse.

5. Results

The newspaper review analyzes reported child abuse instances in publications released from 2020 to 2023. Research was conducted in 2023. The selection of newspapers was based on various considerations, such as their nationwide distribution and readership. The researcher meticulously examined 850 newspapers, crafted news pieces, and delved into comprehensive reports in an attempt to investigate the handling of children's sexual assault. The materials were grouped into broader groups based on research questions related to the type of incident. Subsequently, the items in each category were counted for each newspaper individually and collectively. Each piece delved further into topics such as the framing of reports on child sexual abuse, the purpose of reporting, and the level of child welfare issues.

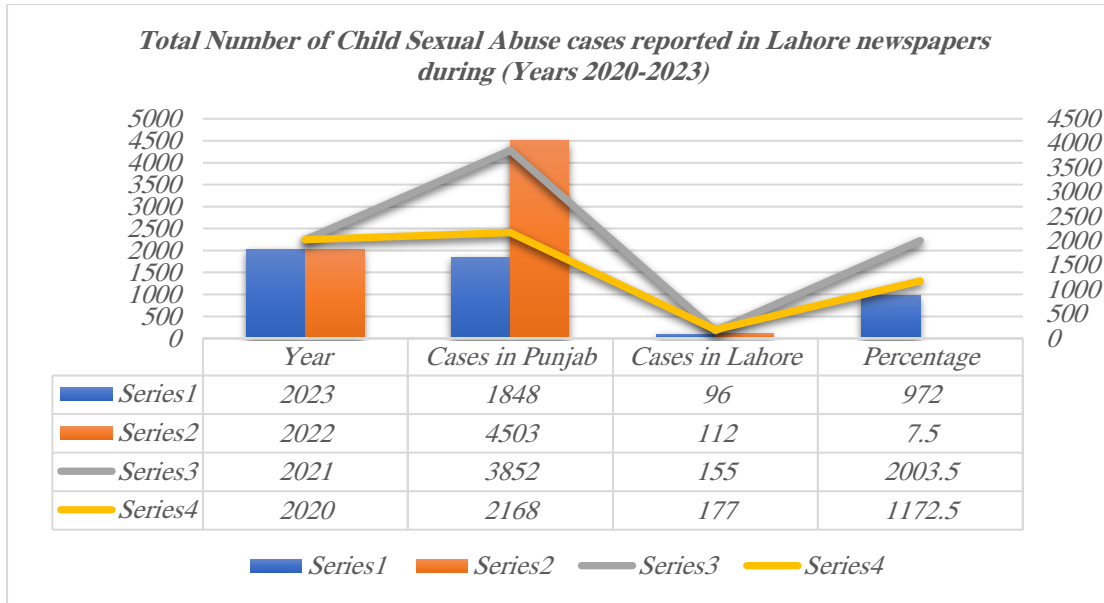


Figure 1. Total Number of Child Sexual Abuse cases reported in Lahore newspapers during (Years 2020-2023)

Figure 1 revealed that Lahore reported 96 out of a total of 150 cases in the year 2023, the highest number. In 2022, the second-highest number of instances, 112, was reported. In Lahore, 155 cases were reported in 2021 and 177 cases were reported in 2020.

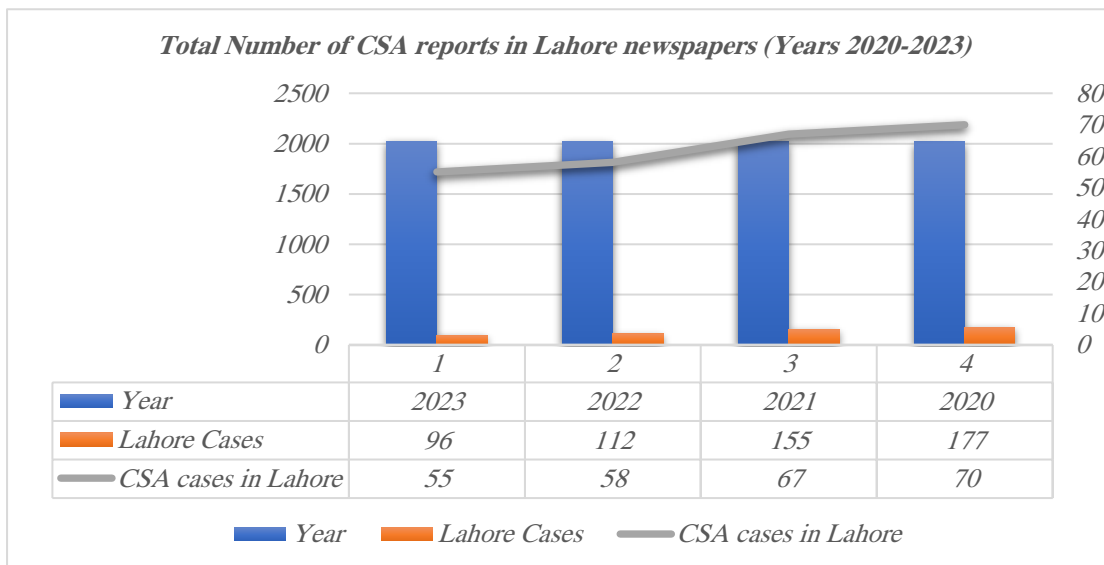


Figure 2. Total Number of CSA reports in Lahore newspapers (Years 2020-2023)

In 2023, Lahore reported the largest number of instances of CSA, with 55 cases, as shown in Figure 2. There were 58 reported cases of CSA in 2022, 67 cases in 2021, and 70 cases in 2020.

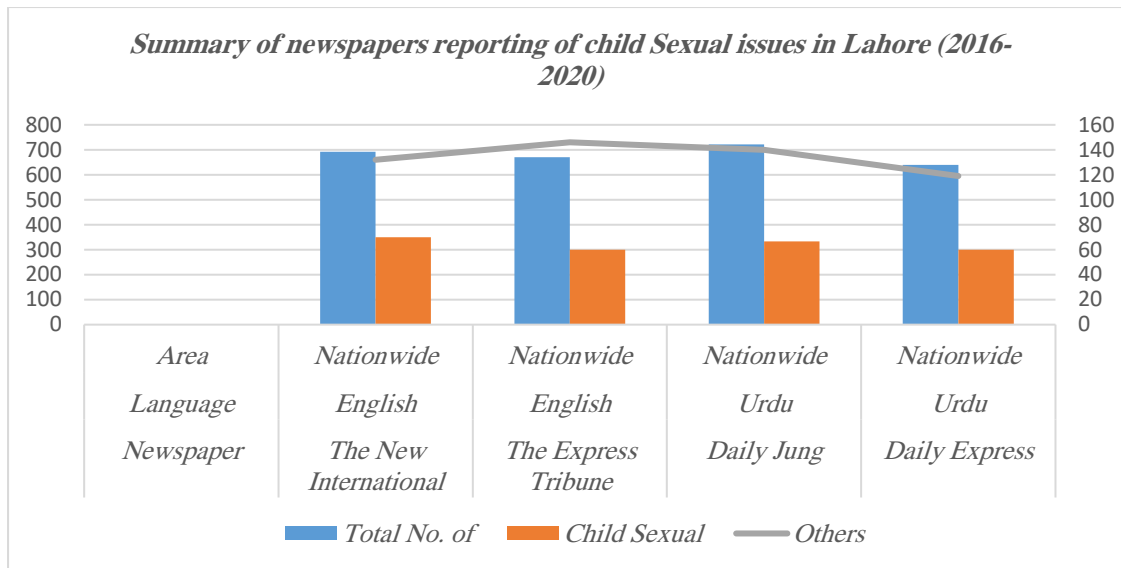


Figure 3. Summary of newspapers reporting of child Sexual issues in Lahore (2016-2020)

Figure 3 displays that between 2020 and 2023, a total of 2718 incidences of child abuse in Lahore were documented in four publications, two in English and two in Urdu. The figure above displays the data. A survey spanning four years revealed that 2178 child abuse instances were publicized in national media in Lahore, encompassing both English and Urdu publications. The researcher collected two English newspapers, The New International and The Express Tribune, as well as two Urdu publications, Daily Jung and Daily Express. The English Newspapers (The New International and The Express Tribune) reported a total of 1368 instances, with 695 cases of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). The Urdu Newspapers (Daily Jung and Daily Express) reported 1350 cases, with 680 cases of CSA.

5.1. Media Framing and Societal Responses to Child Abuse

Framing in media refers to the way news stories are constructed and presented, which can significantly influence public perception and societal responses. The two primary types of framing identified in this study are thematic and episodic framing.

5.1.1. Thematic Framing

This involves presenting child abuse as part of broader social issues, highlighting systemic factors, and often suggesting solutions or preventive measures. Thematic framing provides context and connects individual cases to wider societal trends.

5.1.2. Episodic Framing

This focuses on specific incidents of child abuse, often detailing the event without connecting it to broader societal issues. Episodic framing tends to evoke emotional responses but may not encourage long-term solutions or systemic change.

5.2. Analysis of Results

Based on the thematic analysis of the coded data, the following key findings were observed:

5.2.1. Thematic Framing and Societal Responses

Systemic Awareness: Articles that employed thematic framing often led to a broader awareness of systemic issues related to child abuse, such as poverty, lack of education, and

inadequate child protection policies. These articles were more likely to prompt discussions on policy reforms and the need for improved social services.

Advocacy and Prevention: Thematic framing encouraged advocacy groups and NGOs to push for preventive measures and long-term solutions. It fostered a more informed public discourse, leading to greater support for child protection initiatives and legislative changes.

5.2.2. Episodic Framing and Societal Responses

Emotional Reactions: Articles with episodic framing evoked strong emotional reactions, such as anger, sadness, or shock. While this type of framing increased immediate public attention and outrage, it often led to a reactive rather than proactive societal response.

Short-term Actions: Episodic framing tended to result in short-term actions, such as fundraising for the victim's family or calls for immediate justice against the perpetrator. However, it did not typically lead to sustained efforts to address the root causes of child abuse.

5.2.3. Comparative Analysis: Urdu vs. English Newspapers

The study also found differences in framing between Urdu and English newspapers:

Urdu Newspapers: Predominantly used episodic framing with sensationalist language. This approach generated heightened emotional responses and immediate public outcry but lacked follow-through on long-term solutions.

English Newspapers: More likely to employ thematic framing with sensitive language. These articles fostered a deeper understanding of systemic issues and encouraged sustained advocacy efforts.

5.3. Societal Impact

Public Perception: The way child abuse cases are framed influences how society perceives the problem. Thematic framing helps the public understand the complexity and systemic nature of child abuse, leading to more informed and compassionate societal attitudes.

Policy and Advocacy: Thematic articles often serve as a catalyst for policy discussions and advocacy work. They help keep child abuse on the public agenda and support efforts to implement comprehensive child protection laws and policies.

Support for Victims: Episodic framing, while effective in generating immediate support for individual victims, can sometimes lead to victim-blaming or stigmatization. In contrast, thematic framing tends to promote a more supportive environment for victims by highlighting systemic failures rather than individual shortcomings.

The framing of child abuse cases in the media has a profound impact on societal responses. Thematic framing fosters a deeper understanding of the issues and encourages long-term solutions, while episodic framing generates immediate attention but often lacks sustained impact. Understanding these dynamics can help media practitioners, policymakers, and advocates shape their strategies to more effectively address and prevent child abuse.

6. Discussion

In both urban and rural areas, the incidence of sexual assault is rising, particularly among middle-class, working-class, and economically disadvantaged populations. Additionally, news reports often fail to provide reasons for the murder and killing of children. Newspapers have not given sufficient attention to issues related to child protection, primarily because the media

often prioritizes political agendas. Before any specific instance received notice on social media or mainstream media, newspapers did not publish stories on their front pages.

There is no code of ethics that addresses the ethical considerations of publishing or framing a story involving child sexual abuse. Framing is typically defined as the process of selecting and promoting particular aspects of perceived reality, which can include promoting a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation. Framing can also involve highlighting certain attributes of an object as the central theme of a message. This strategy impacts how media and advertising are perceived.

Based on the findings, a total of 16,300 instances of child abuse were reported in Pakistani newspapers over the past five years (2020-2023). In the province of Punjab alone, 12,371 instances of child abuse were reported during this period. In Lahore, 706 instances were documented between 2020 and 2023.

7. Conclusion

In Pakistani society, newspapers play a crucial role in highlighting the real and potential threats faced by children, particularly concerning child abuse issues in cities like Lahore, the country's second-largest city. The research findings suggest that Urdu-language newspapers tend to use harsher tones and language compared to English-language newspapers when reporting on cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Lahore. This indicates a potential difference in how news is presented across different linguistic contexts and highlights how the language of reporting can influence public perceptions and reactions to such sensitive issues.

Newspaper coverage serves as a methodological record of these challenges, bringing them to public attention and prompting governmental action. However, the reporting often lacks sensitivity and understanding of relevant legislation, leading to sensationalized narratives and the politicization of child abuse. This trend contributes to risk-averse and punitive responses within societal systems. Nonetheless, such coverage offers valuable insights for professionals in child welfare and media, facilitating a better understanding of public perceptions and potential avenues for change.

Strengthening anti-child sexual abuse legislation and implementing educational programs could mitigate the prevalence of child abuse. Crucially, accurate data collection and adherence to ethical standards in reporting, including protecting victims' privacy, are imperative. Ultimately, newspapers serve as a vital platform for raising awareness about child abuse issues, but effective action requires collaboration between government entities and civil society to address structural deficiencies and protect vulnerable children.

8. Recommendation

To improve reporting on child abuse and enhance child protection efforts, the following action-oriented recommendations are provided for journalists, policymakers, and child protection organizations:

8.1. For Journalists and Media Outlets

- **Implement Stringent Reporting Criteria:** Establish more stringent criteria for reporting on cases of child abuse to ensure the names of victims are protected, reporting is sensitive, and information is accurate.

- **Ethical Reporting Practices:** Promote responsible journalistic methods that prioritize the well-being of victims and refrain from sensationalizing or exploiting their trauma for the sake of generating headlines or ratings.
- **Training Programs:** Provide journalists with training courses and materials on ethical reporting practices, techniques for conducting trauma-informed interviews, and an understanding of the psychological impact media coverage has on survivors of child abuse.
- **Collaborate with Experts:** Establish collaborations between media organizations, child protection groups, and mental health specialists to offer victims and their families correct information, assistance, and resources.

8.2. For Policymakers

- **Strengthen Legislation:** Enhance anti-child sexual abuse legislation to provide more comprehensive protections for children and ensure strict penalties for perpetrators.
- **Support Educational Programs:** Implement and support educational programs aimed at raising awareness about child protection laws and the importance of ethical reporting among journalists.
- **Promote Transparency and Accountability:** Encourage collaboration between local authorities and media outlets to promote transparency, accountability, and public awareness of initiatives to address and prevent child abuse in Lahore.

8.3. For Child Protection Organizations

- **Advocate for Ethical Reporting:** Work with media outlets to advocate for ethical reporting standards that respect the dignity and privacy of child abuse victims.
- **Provide Resources and Training:** Offer resources and training for journalists on child protection issues and the impact of media coverage on victims and their families.
- **Facilitate Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between child protection organizations, media outlets, and policymakers to create a unified approach to addressing child abuse and improving societal responses.

By implementing these recommendations, journalists, policymakers, and child protection organizations can work together to improve the quality of reporting on child abuse, enhance public awareness, and create a safer environment for vulnerable children in Lahore and beyond.

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