A plea and a plan to Protect Our Children
September 21st, 2020

It is deeply disturbing that violence against women and children continues unabated in Pakistan. Many solutions have been offered to address the issue of child sexual abuse in particular, the most recent of which proposed the following interventions: (i) policing, specifically through registration of sex offenders and paedophiles, (ii) legislation to give child rapists exemplary punishments like public hanging or chemical castration and, (iii) controlling vulgarity in films and television in an attempt to reduce sex crimes and preserve the family system.

As organisations committed to protecting and empowering children, we appreciate the Prime Minister taking an active interest in eradicating child sexual abuse. However, our experience from working directly with school children and through community programs shows that there are no quick or easy solutions to the endemic of child sexual abuse.

Global and national research clearly shows that an overwhelming majority of abuse takes place in or close to the home and is perpetrated by relatives and trusted adults. In addition, social attitudes link rape to dishonor and shame. Together, this not only discourages survivors and their families from reporting child abuse but also thwarts attempts by the few who do seek justice through official channels by pushing them to forgive or “settle” instead. To eliminate child sexual abuse, we need a coordinated, systemic, state response, taking into account the ground realities. Here are our recommendations for what Pakistan needs to do to protect our children:

- The state must introduce Child Protection via Life Skills Based Education (LSBE) in all schools with Parent Education being a critical aspect. Children must be taught in school how to identify and protect themselves from abuse as well as how to respect others and prevent themselves from becoming abusers. Age appropriate, culturally sensitive and relevant LSBE content has been developed and field tested across Pakistan and is ready for the state to adopt into its textbooks, curricula and mass awareness programs. School LSBE programs must also engage and sensitise parents to identify signs of abuse and support their children in feeling safe and confident about reporting abuse.

- The state must launch regular mass awareness campaigns through media for parents, law enforcement agencies and healthcare providers to listen to children and support them, an essential social pre-requisite for justice.
• The state must establish **Special Police Units at the district level** with male and female officers trained to deal sensitively with cases of child sexual abuse. Additionally, all police stations need to be equipped with rape kits and forensic lab support within their province.

• The state must activate and mobilise their **Child Protection Units** in every province, and within each province ensure their presence in every district. Child protection institutions (CPIs) practicing alternative family-based care must (a) rescue and protect children, specially survivors of child sexual abuse, when families are not safe and (b) also monitor any institutions interacting with children and hold them accountable as per law.

• The state must establish **specific child-friendly courts** to ensure that child survivors get access to sensitive justice.

• The state must invest in ensuring an **increase the number of women** in the police force, in the legal profession (as lawyers and prosecutors) and mandate an increase the number of female judges and female medico-legal officers.

• The state must provide **free legal aid** to survivors of child sexual abuse.

• The state must provide **free counseling and therapy** for survivors of child sexual abuse by therapists trained in the specialty.

• The state must mandate hospitals, clinics and health units to provide awareness to and train and sensitize healthcare providers to provide appropriate care to survivors of child sexual abuse.

• Finally, the state must establish **strong linkages between relevant departments** including education, child welfare, police and health, as well as the civil society voices, specially child rights organisations to build a coordinated approach to end violence against children.