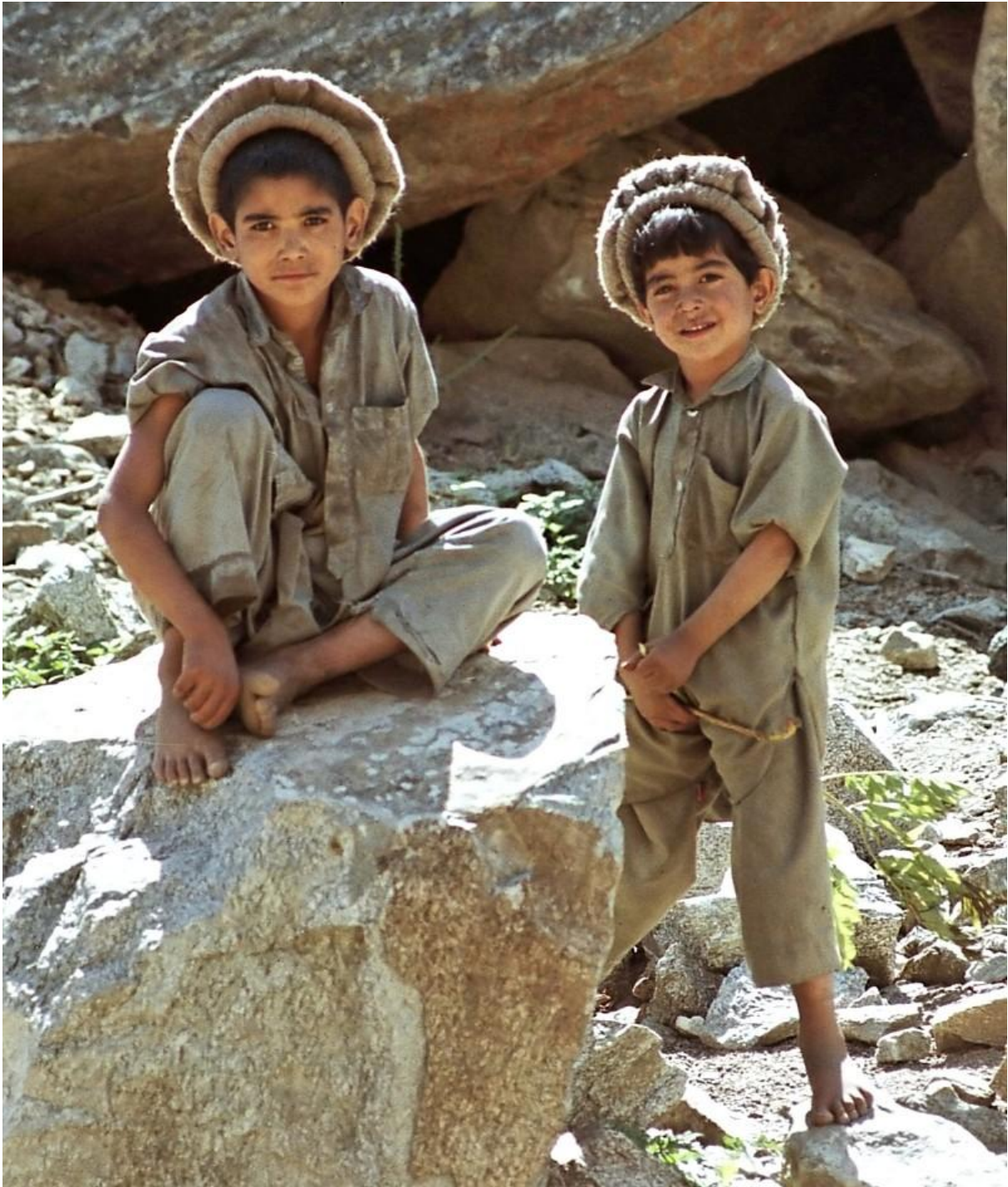


Abuse of boys in Pakistan and Bangladesh



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Overview and Context

The abuse of boys in Bangladesh and Pakistan is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural frameworks of these societies. Both countries share common cultural elements stemming from their shared history under British colonial rule and, before that, the Mughal Empire, which shaped their societal structures, gender roles, and traditional practices.

In both Bangladesh and Pakistan, traditional gender roles have been heavily influenced by patriarchal systems. These roles dictate a rigid hierarchy where men are dominant figures in both public and private spheres, while women and children, including boys, are often subordinated. This patriarchal structure tends to normalise the subjugation and control of those perceived as weaker, including children, and boys are expected to conform to certain behavioural norms that align with traditional masculinity. Boys in these societies are often socialised from a young age to adopt traits such as toughness, emotional restraint, and obedience to authority figures. Deviation from these expectations can result in various forms of abuse as punishment or a method of enforcing conformity. The pressure to conform to these rigid gender norms not only perpetuates cycles of abuse but also silences boys who may otherwise seek help, as doing so could be perceived as a sign of weakness.

Moreover, societal norms in Bangladesh and Pakistan often dictate that boys are the bearers of family honour. Any perceived threat to this honour can lead to severe repercussions, whether through non-conformity or victimisation. This cultural emphasis on honour can result in families covering up abuse to avoid social stigma, further entrenching the cycle of violence and making it difficult for boys to seek help or receive justice.

Certain traditional practices and beliefs also contribute to the abuse of boys in these regions. For example, the practice of “bacha bazi” in Afghanistan, which borders Pakistan, is a known form of sexual exploitation of young boys by older men and has been reported in parts of Pakistan as well. Although it is officially illegal, the practice persists due to weak law enforcement, corruption, and deep-seated cultural attitudes that view boys as objects rather than individuals with rights. In Bangladesh, while not as publicly reported as in Pakistan, similar issues exist, often exacerbated by poverty and social inequalities. Boys from poorer families are particularly vulnerable to being exploited in the workforce, where they may face physical abuse and neglect or be trafficked for sexual exploitation. Traditional views that see boys as workers or economic assets rather than as children needing protection further perpetuate these abuses.

Types of Abuse

Boys in Bangladesh and Pakistan may face a wide range of abuses, each deeply intertwined with the societal and cultural factors discussed above. The main types of abuse include physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect.

Physical Abuse: Physical abuse of boys is prevalent in both Bangladesh and Pakistan, often rationalised under the guise of discipline or control. In homes, schools, and workplaces,

corporal punishment is commonly accepted as a means to enforce obedience and discipline. In many cases, this physical abuse is severe, leading to lasting physical and psychological harm. The normalization of corporal punishment in these societies makes it difficult to distinguish between what is considered 'discipline' and what constitutes abuse, leaving many boys in a vulnerable position.

Emotional Abuse: Emotional abuse is another significant issue, though it is often less visible than physical or sexual abuse. Boys may be subjected to constant criticism, humiliation, and verbal assaults that aim to diminish their self-worth and force them into compliance with societal expectations. The pressure to conform to rigid gender roles can also lead to emotional distress, particularly for boys who do not fit the mould of traditional masculinity. This type of abuse can have long-term psychological effects, contributing to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse of boys is a grave issue in both countries, though it is often underreported due to cultural taboos and fears of social stigma. Boys who are sexually abused are often coerced into silence through threats, shame, or violence. In Pakistan, the practice of “bacha bazi” and other forms of sexual exploitation highlight the severity of this problem. In Bangladesh, boys in certain vulnerable communities, such as those living in poverty or in refugee camps, are at a heightened risk of sexual exploitation by traffickers and abusers. The cultural reluctance to acknowledge male victims of sexual abuse further compounds the issue, as boys are less likely to receive support or justice. The deep-seated stigma associated with being a male victim of sexual abuse in these cultures often leads to isolation, further abuse, and severe psychological trauma.

Neglect: Neglect is another pervasive form of abuse in both Bangladesh and Pakistan, particularly among boys from impoverished or marginalized communities. Neglect can manifest as a lack of access to education, healthcare, proper nutrition, and emotional support. In many cases, boys are forced into labour at a young age, depriving them of their childhood and the opportunity to receive an education. This neglect not only undermines their immediate well-being but also has long-term implications for their prospects and overall development. In some cases, neglect may also take the form of emotional abandonment, where boys are left to fend for themselves in environments that are hostile or unsupportive. This neglect can have devastating effects, leading to issues such as substance abuse, involvement in criminal activities, and an increased risk of being victimized by other forms of abuse.

Conclusion: The abuse of boys in Bangladesh and Pakistan is a multifaceted issue deeply rooted in the historical and cultural contexts of these societies. The rigid gender roles, traditional practices, and societal norms that prevail in these countries contribute to a culture where abuse is often normalized and goes unchallenged. Boys face various forms of abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect, each of which leaves lasting scars on their physical and psychological well-being. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that challenges these deeply ingrained cultural norms, strengthens legal protections,

and provides support systems for victims. Without such measures, the cycle of abuse is likely to continue, perpetuating the suffering of countless boys in these regions.

Analysis of Root Causes and Contributing Factors

A complex interplay of socioeconomic conditions, legal inadequacies, and cultural influences influences the abuse of boys in Pakistan and Bangladesh. This analysis explores these root causes and contributing factors, highlighting how poverty, legal frameworks, and religious beliefs impact the prevalence and nature of abuse against boys in these countries.

Socioeconomic Factors

Poverty and Economic Instability: Poverty is a major driver of child abuse in both Pakistan and Bangladesh. Economic hardship forces many families to rely on their children for additional income, which often leads to boys being pushed into labor markets where abuse is prevalent. In Pakistan, boys are frequently found working in hazardous environments such as brick kilns, construction sites, and street begging. These sectors are notorious for their poor working conditions and high incidence of physical abuse. The dire economic conditions create a situation where boys are not only exploited for labor but are also subjected to severe mistreatment.

In Bangladesh, economic instability drives many boys into informal labor sectors, including domestic work and garment manufacturing. These environments are often characterized by abusive practices, with boys working long hours under unsafe conditions. The need for financial support for their families forces boys into these vulnerable situations, where they are at high risk of exploitation and abuse. The lack of adequate financial support systems exacerbates their vulnerability, leading to increased instances of abuse.

According to a UNICEF report, boys constitute about three-quarters of all working children. Almost one in five children aged 5-14 are child laborers in slums, with only 25 percent attending school. Rapid urbanization exacerbates this issue, compelling more children to move into urban slums and enter the labor force. On average, children work 28 hours a week and earn merely 222 taka (3.3 USD) a week. Many of these jobs are considered hazardous, posing significant risks to their physical and mental development. The lack of adequate financial support systems exacerbates their vulnerability, leading to increased instances of abuse.

Lack of Education: The lack of access to quality education significantly contributes to the abuse of boys. In Pakistan, educational opportunities are often limited, particularly in rural areas where schools may be scarce or poorly equipped. Boys who do not attend school are more likely to enter the labor force at a young age, where they are at greater risk of abuse. The absence of education leaves these boys without the knowledge or means to recognize or report abusive situations, further increasing their vulnerability. The lack of adequate educational infrastructure in Pakistan significantly contributes to child abuse. Education is a crucial factor in preventing abuse, as it empowers children with knowledge and skills to

break free from exploitative situations. However, according to the World Bank, the net enrollment rate for primary education was only 65.3% in 2018, leaving a large portion of children without access to schooling.

In impoverished communities, the absence of nearby schools, adequate classrooms, and essential educational materials makes it difficult for children to attend school. Financial constraints further prevent families from affording uniforms, books, and transportation, contributing to the abuse of children who are pushed into labor instead of education.

Legal cases, such as Syed Nazeer Agha vs. Government of Balochistan and Human Rights Case 19360-P, illustrate the systemic issues in Pakistan's educational infrastructure. These cases reveal that merely providing free education is insufficient; a conducive learning environment and proper implementation of educational rights are essential to combat child abuse effectively.

In Bangladesh, despite progress in expanding educational access, many boys still drop out of school to work, especially in informal sectors. According to the new National Education Policy, education is free and compulsory up to grade eight. However, more than one million children have never been to school, and many drop out before completing primary education due to the inability to bear educational expenses. The lack of education not only perpetuates the cycle of poverty but also heightens their susceptibility to various forms of abuse. Without education, boys are less likely to understand their rights and more likely to accept abusive situations as normal.

Legal Factors

Weak Legal Protections: The legal frameworks in both Pakistan and Bangladesh are often insufficient to protect boys from abuse. In Pakistan, laws against child abuse exist but are poorly enforced due to corruption, lack of resources, and social norms that devalue children's rights. The judicial system is often slow and inefficient, making it difficult for victims to seek justice. As a result, perpetrators of abuse are rarely held accountable, which perpetuates a culture of impunity. The lack of strong legal enforcement and inadequate judicial processes make it challenging to combat the widespread abuse of boys in Pakistan.

Bangladesh faces similar challenges with legal protections. While the country has laws in place to protect children, enforcement is often weak due to inadequate resources and corruption within the legal system. The lack of effective legal mechanisms to address child abuse means that many cases go unreported or unresolved, leaving boys vulnerable to ongoing abuse. The weak legal framework and lack of accountability for abusers contribute to the perpetuation of abuse against boys in Bangladesh.

Cultural and Religious Factors

Gender Norms and Patriarchal Attitudes: Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes in both Pakistan and Bangladesh contribute significantly to the abuse of boys. Cultural norms often dictate that boys must adhere to strict gender roles, which can include tolerating abuse

without complaint. These norms discourage boys from speaking out about their experiences, as doing so may be seen as a sign of weakness or failure to conform to traditional masculine ideals. The societal pressure to conform to these rigid gender roles creates an environment where abuse is normalized and boys feel compelled to endure it in silence. The cultural acceptance of such abuse makes it difficult to challenge and address the issue effectively.

Religious Beliefs and Practices: In both countries, religious beliefs and practices can play a dual role in both preventing and perpetuating abuse. While Islam, the predominant religion in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, advocates for the protection and well-being of children, cultural interpretations and practices sometimes contradict these teachings. In Pakistan, certain conservative religious interpretations may be used to justify harsh disciplinary measures against boys, viewing such practices as necessary for instilling moral and religious values. This can lead to physical and emotional abuse being masked as religious discipline.

In Bangladesh, religious beliefs can sometimes intersect with cultural practices to justify the mistreatment of boys, particularly in rural areas. While religious teachings advocate for compassion and care, cultural practices rooted in religious contexts may perpetuate abusive behaviors. Addressing the abuse of boys in these countries requires a nuanced understanding of how religious and cultural factors intersect and influence behavior. Efforts to combat abuse must work within these frameworks to promote interpretations of religious teachings that support the protection and well-being of children.

Case Examples and Statistics

Pakistan: In Pakistan, child labor is a significant issue that places many boys at risk of abuse. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 3.3 million children in Pakistan are engaged in labor, with boys constituting the majority. These boys often work in hazardous conditions where they are exposed to physical and emotional abuse. A study conducted by the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) found that many boys working in brick kilns and carpet weaving industries face severe abuse, including physical violence and exploitative labor practices.

Bangladesh: In Bangladesh, the garment industry is a major sector where boys are employed and face various forms of abuse. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reports that about 1.7 million children are engaged in child labor, with boys making up a significant portion. These boys often work long hours in unsafe conditions, facing physical and emotional abuse from employers. A report by Human Rights Watch highlights the harsh realities faced by boys in the garment sector, including physical punishment, verbal abuse, and lack of access to education and healthcare.

In both countries, legal cases and reports provide insight into the pervasive nature of child abuse. For instance, in Pakistan, the case of Zainab Ansari, a young girl who was brutally raped and murdered, sparked nationwide protests and highlighted the issue of child abuse. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the murder of 13-year-old Rajon, who was beaten to death by a group of men, brought attention to the brutality faced by boys in the country.

Conclusion

The abuse of boys in Pakistan and Bangladesh is a multifaceted issue driven by socioeconomic, legal, and cultural factors. Poverty, lack of education, weak legal protections, and deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes contribute to the vulnerability of boys to various forms of abuse. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes strengthening legal frameworks, improving educational access, and challenging harmful cultural norms. Efforts must also involve community engagement and education to promote the rights and well-being of boys, ensuring they are protected from abuse and exploitation.

Governmental and Non-Governmental Efforts in Pakistan and Bangladesh

Abuse in all its forms—physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect—is a derivative of socioeconomic and cultural conditions. In any case, the consequences for the child are multiple, especially when it is undetected or when effective mechanisms for detection, assistance to victims, and accountability of perpetrators are absent. It is therefore necessary to step up efforts to prevent and tackle the issue. To this end, existing domestic legislation, its alignment with international standards, and NGO programs will be examined.

At the outset, it is important to highlight the existence of a legislative framework for protecting children's rights in both countries. In particular, Pakistan has passed the National Commission on the Rights of the Child Act (2017) and the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act (2020) (Sajjad, 2022). Bangladesh has the Children Act (2013) which consolidates laws relating to child rights and protection (Save the Children, 2020). Although none of the above legislation addresses the abuse of boys, it is necessary to highlight the domestic legislation as to some extent it helps to uphold the rights of children, including boys. Despite these laws, enforcement is often weak due to corruption, lack of financial resources, and inadequate training of law enforcement personnel. Accountability mechanisms must be created to address this phenomenon more effectively (BSAF, 2014).

The adoption of international conventions is noteworthy. In particular, they have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The CRC is the most comprehensive document on children's rights, covering various aspects including protection from abuse and exploitation, the right to education, health, and other fundamental rights. Similarly, they signed in 2011 and 2000 respectively the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (OPSC). This protocol focuses on combating child exploitation and trafficking, ensuring that children are protected from being sold, used in prostitution, or exploited in pornography. Furthermore, they signed in 2016 and 2000 the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), which aims to protect children from recruitment and use in armed conflicts (Save the Children, 2020).

Both Pakistan and Bangladesh have made significant progress in establishing programs to address violence against children. In particular, they have implemented Pakistan's Child Protection and Welfare Bureau and Bangladesh's Child Helpline 1098 to provide immediate

assistance to distressed children. They have also implemented several campaigns. For example, NGOs like Sahil in Pakistan and the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) offer advocacy, legal aid, and support to victims of child abuse. They also work towards policy changes and greater accountability (BSAF, 2014). Also, organizations provide counseling, rehabilitation, and shelter to abused children. For instance, the Edhi Foundation in Pakistan offers shelters and services for abused and neglected children.

There are a few state action programs that are designed to address violence against children. Major shortcomings of these initiatives are a) they do not focus on boys. Much of the programs are geared towards violence against girls, neglecting to take action on violence against boys. b) Programs for preventing such phenomena are absent, i.e., strengthening socio-economic factors, i.e., education. It is also necessary to provide free psychological support to individuals, especially children who have suffered violence. Effective training can equip police officers with the knowledge and skills to handle cases of abuse better, offer support to victims, and prevent such incidents from occurring. Finally, although non-governmental organizations have set up programs to tackle the phenomenon, these remain limited and are often targeted exclusively at girls and women.

Furthermore, Pakistan and Bangladesh must ratify international conventions and protocols, emphasising more specific areas for promoting and protecting their rights. For example, they must sign the Optional Protocol on a Communications Procedure, which allows children to submit complaints regarding specific rights violations. The Protocol will provide a more holistic approach to addressing the phenomenon. Furthermore, they could deepen their regional cooperation. For example, sign the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Convention on Regional Arrangements for "The Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia." This convention focuses on regional cooperation to promote child welfare and protect children from abuse and exploitation in South Asia.

Evidently, domestic and international legislation and NGO programs are crucial for protecting children's rights but remain limited in scope. These initiatives primarily focus on issues like child labor, sexualization, and children in armed conflicts, while the abuse of boys is notably absent from their agendas. The lack of comprehensive literature on the abuse of boys leads to underreporting and limited awareness of the issue, while the abuse of girls and women receives disproportionate attention (Sajjad, 2022). Recent reports, such as those by Dawn, highlight the abuse of boys in factories (Chaudhry, 2023), indicating that the issue remains significant despite being less publicised. This non-disclosure, driven by a lack of education and fear of stigmatisation, underscores the need for policies addressing the abuse of boys.

Overall Conclusion

The abuse of boys in Bangladesh and Pakistan represents a critical yet often overlooked issue deeply entrenched in the historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts of these societies. The examination reveals a complex interplay of traditional gender roles, patriarchal norms, and economic hardships that significantly contribute to various forms of abuse—physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect. These abuses are exacerbated by weak legal frameworks, insufficient enforcement of existing laws, and cultural practices that perpetuate silence and stigmatization of male victims.

Both countries have established legislative frameworks aimed at protecting children's rights, such as Pakistan's National Commission on the Rights of the Child Act (2017) and Bangladesh's Children Act (2013). However, these laws often fall short of addressing the specific needs of boys who suffer from abuse. International conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocols, provide a robust framework for child protection, but their implementation in both countries remains inconsistent.

Efforts by governmental and non-governmental organizations, including child protection bureaus and advocacy groups, have made strides in providing support and raising awareness. Yet, significant gaps persist, particularly in addressing the abuse of boys and in implementing preventive measures. The absence of targeted programs for boys and the lack of comprehensive support systems further hinder progress.

To effectively combat the abuse of boys, a multifaceted approach is necessary. This includes strengthening legal protections, improving the enforcement of existing laws, and enhancing educational and economic opportunities. There is also a pressing need for more inclusive policies that specifically address the abuse of boys, coupled with increased awareness and reduced stigma surrounding male victims. By addressing these gaps and fostering regional and international cooperation, both Bangladesh and Pakistan can better safeguard the rights and well-being of all children, ensuring that no child is left vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

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