

Child Rape In Pakistan: Examining Judicial, Investigative And Child-Protection Responses Through A Multi-Provincial Case Study

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Abstract

Child rape constitutes a serious violation of children's dignity, bodily integrity, security, and fundamental rights. Although Pakistan has substantially strengthened its legal and institutional framework through the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020 and the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021, significant barriers continue to affect children's access to justice. This study examines judicial, investigative, forensic, and child-protection responses to child rape through a qualitative, doctrinal, and multi-provincial case-study approach covering Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Islamabad Capital Territory. It analyses judicial decisions, legislation, institutional practices, and recorded 2025 data to identify systemic and provincial differences in the criminal justice response. The findings demonstrate that courts increasingly recognise children's vulnerability, delayed reporting, and the contextual significance of medical and forensic evidence. Nevertheless, persistent weaknesses remain in FIR registration, police investigation, medico-legal examination, forensic capacity, prosecution, inter-agency coordination, victim protection, and psychosocial support. The 2025 data recorded 17,348 children involved in relevant sexual offences, with Punjab accounting for the largest recorded share. These figures should not be treated as prevalence estimates because reporting and institutional capacity vary across jurisdictions. The study concludes that Pakistan's principal child-rape justice deficit is an implementation deficit requiring an integrated, child-sensitive, and accountable response.

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1. Introduction

Child rape constitutes one of the most serious forms of violence against children and represents a profound violation of human dignity, bodily integrity, privacy, security, and fundamental rights. Its consequences are not confined to the immediate physical effects of sexual violence but may extend across psychological, social, educational, and developmental dimensions of a child's life. The vulnerability of child victims is further intensified by the circumstances in which sexual abuse frequently occurs. Offenders may exploit relationships of trust, authority, familiarity, dependency, or emotional attachment, thereby making disclosure difficult and delaying access to formal justice mechanisms. Children may lack the capacity, confidence, or opportunity to report abuse independently and may depend upon parents, guardians, teachers, health professionals, or other adults to initiate protective and legal interventions. A legally effective response must therefore recognise that children encounter the criminal justice system from a position of particular vulnerability and that procedures designed without regard to this vulnerability may themselves contribute to further

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harm. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2017) accordingly emphasises child-centred, trauma-informed responses that protect safety, dignity, participation, and psychological well-being throughout the process of responding to sexual abuse.

In Pakistan, child sexual abuse remains a serious and substantially underreported social, public-health, and criminal justice concern. Existing scholarship suggests that the problem cannot be understood solely through the number of cases formally registered with the police because reporting is shaped by social stigma, family pressures, fear of retaliation, limited institutional awareness, and weaknesses in child-protection structures. Granich et al. (2023), in their analysis of child sexual abuse in Pakistan, identify underreporting, inadequate protective structures, limited public awareness, and weaknesses in intervention and treatment as interconnected dimensions of the problem. Their analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of legal intervention cannot be assessed independently from the social and institutional environment in which reporting occurs. Consequently, official statistics should be interpreted cautiously: they represent cases that have entered the formal reporting system and cannot necessarily be treated as a complete measure of the actual incidence of child sexual abuse in Pakistan.

Recent empirical research further illustrates the scale and institutional complexity of the problem. Ali et al. (2026) examined reported child sexual abuse cases across 738 police stations in 38 districts of Punjab for the period 2014–2023, combining police records with medico-legal information, forensic evidence, spatial analysis, and information concerning victim–offender relationships. Their findings demonstrate substantial variation in reporting patterns, forensic evidence availability, and case outcomes, while also identifying weaknesses in the preservation and integration of forensic evidence within the criminal justice process. The study is particularly significant because it moves beyond a narrowly epidemiological account of child sexual abuse and demonstrates the importance of connecting police investigation, medico-legal examination, forensic evidence, and child-protection responses within a single institutional framework.

Pakistan has nevertheless undertaken considerable legislative reform aimed at strengthening the legal response to sexual violence against children. The *Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act 2016* introduced specific provisions addressing sexual abuse of children, including sections 377A and 377B of the Pakistan Penal Code 1860. The *Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020* subsequently established a statutory framework for responding to missing and abducted children and created mechanisms intended to facilitate their recovery and protection. Most significantly for the criminal justice response, the *Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021* established a specialised legal framework for the investigation and trial of rape and scheduled sexual offences. The Act was intended to address longstanding deficiencies associated with delayed investigations, evidentiary problems, specialised institutional capacity, and prolonged trials.

The *Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021* represents a significant shift from reliance upon ordinary criminal justice mechanisms towards a more specialised institutional model. The legislation provides for mechanisms including Anti-Rape Crisis Cells, specialised

investigation structures, Special Courts, and specialised prosecutorial arrangements. It also incorporates measures relating to victim and witness protection and procedures intended to protect victims from unnecessary exposure during criminal proceedings. The Ministry of Law and Justice has subsequently issued rules addressing investigation, trial procedure, medico-legal processes, sex-offender registration, and victim and witness protection. The current official framework includes the *Anti-Rape (Investigation) Rules 2022*, *Anti-Rape (Trial Procedure) Rules 2022*, *Anti-Rape (Crises Cell and Medico-Legal) Rules 2022*, *Anti-Rape (Sex Offenders Register) Rules 2023*, and *Anti-Rape (Victim and Witness Protection) Rules 2025*.

The expansion of legislation, however, does not by itself establish effective access to justice. The central concern increasingly lies in the implementation gap between formal legal commitments and institutional practice. A statutory framework may prescribe specialised procedures and safeguards, yet their practical value depends upon whether police officers, medico-legal practitioners, forensic experts, prosecutors, judges, and child-protection personnel possess the resources, training, institutional coordination, and accountability necessary to implement them. The existence of specialised legislation should therefore be regarded as a starting point rather than an indication that the criminal justice system has effectively resolved the structural problems associated with child rape.

Investigation constitutes a particularly important stage in this process because deficiencies at the initial stage may irreversibly affect the evidentiary strength of a case. Effective investigation requires prompt registration of complaints, preservation of relevant evidence, appropriate identification and interviewing of witnesses, timely medico-legal examination, and proper collection, packaging, transportation, storage, and analysis of biological material. Weaknesses in any of these processes may later create difficulties for prosecutors and courts in establishing the reliability and admissibility of evidence. Recent judicial observations in Punjab illustrate the seriousness of these institutional weaknesses. In a 2026 judgment, the Lahore High Court identified poor investigation, weak prosecution, and mishandling of forensic evidence as significant contributors to low conviction rates, including deficiencies concerning DNA sample custody, verification of persons subjected to DNA testing, and documentation of the chain of custody (Sheikh, 2026).

The treatment of forensic evidence consequently forms an important component of the judicial response to child rape. DNA profiling can provide highly probative evidence concerning identity and biological association, but its evidentiary value depends upon the integrity of the processes through which biological material is collected, preserved, transferred, analysed, and presented before a court. Anjum et al. (2026) identify persistent institutional and jurisprudential difficulties surrounding the use of DNA evidence in sexual-offence trials in Pakistan, particularly concerning chain-of-custody requirements, judicial interpretation, and disparities in forensic capacity. Their analysis highlights an important tension within the Pakistani criminal justice system: scientific evidence may possess considerable probative potential, yet weaknesses in institutional handling can reduce its practical evidentiary value.

At the same time, the absence of DNA or other biological evidence cannot reasonably be treated as establishing that sexual abuse did not occur. Child sexual abuse may be reported after a substantial delay, medical examination may take place after the optimal period for recovering biological evidence has passed, and many instances of sexual assault do not produce visible physical injuries. An evidentiary framework that implicitly treats DNA, semen, or physical injury as necessary indicators of sexual violence may therefore impose an unrealistic burden upon child victims. Conversely, where forensic evidence is available, its collection and evaluation must comply with scientifically reliable procedures and legal standards. The appropriate judicial approach is consequently neither to treat DNA evidence as indispensable in every case nor to disregard it when available, but to assess it alongside testimonial, medical, circumstantial, and other relevant evidence.

Child testimony presents a related and particularly sensitive evidentiary issue. Because sexual abuse commonly occurs in private, the child may be the principal or only direct witness to the offence. The offender may also be someone known to the child, thereby reducing the likelihood of independent eyewitness evidence. An insistence upon extensive corroboration in every case may therefore create an evidentiary threshold that is inconsistent with the realities of child sexual abuse. Nevertheless, the protection of children must remain compatible with the constitutional and procedural guarantees afforded to accused persons. The challenge for courts is consequently to evaluate children's testimony with appropriate sensitivity to age, developmental capacity, trauma, and the circumstances of disclosure while maintaining the accused's right to a fair trial.

Delayed reporting requires similar contextual treatment. A child may postpone disclosure because of fear, shame, threats, grooming, emotional dependence upon the offender, family pressure, or uncertainty about how adults will respond. Such factors are particularly significant where the alleged offender is a family member, caregiver, teacher, neighbour, or another person exercising authority or influence over the child. The WHO (2017) recognises the importance of trauma-informed and child-centred responses and cautions against approaches that may intensify distress during medical and investigative processes. In Pakistan, these difficulties may be compounded by social stigma, concerns regarding family reputation, fear of retaliation, and limited awareness of available legal and protective mechanisms. Delay in reporting should therefore be assessed in its social and psychological context rather than automatically treated as evidence undermining the credibility of a child victim.

Recent research concerning judicial responses in Sindh similarly demonstrates that the formal existence of legal protections does not eliminate practical barriers to justice. Begum and Khan (2026) identify underreporting, delayed investigation, witness intimidation, social stigma, limited forensic resources, and weaknesses in specialised child-protection mechanisms as continuing obstacles in the response to child sexual abuse. Their findings reinforce the proposition that judicial reform cannot operate in isolation. Effective access to justice requires sustained coordination among police, medico-legal practitioners, forensic laboratories, prosecutors, courts, child-protection authorities, health professionals, and psychological-support services.

The institutional complexity of the problem is further intensified by Pakistan's federal and provincial structure. Although significant aspects of substantive criminal law are governed through federal legislation, the practical delivery of policing, healthcare, medico-legal services, forensic facilities, prosecution, and child-protection services involves institutions operating at different governmental levels. The 18th Constitutional Amendment further strengthened the role of provincial governments in matters concerning social welfare and related public services. Consequently, the existence of a common federal legal framework does not necessarily produce a uniform experience of justice. Children in different provinces may encounter substantially different levels of investigative capacity, forensic infrastructure, trained personnel, child-protection services, and judicial support.

This provincial dimension remains insufficiently explored within existing legal scholarship. Much of the literature approaches child sexual abuse in Pakistan either as a national social problem or through individual institutional dimensions such as prevalence, legislation, policing, forensic evidence, judicial reasoning, or child protection. While these approaches have generated valuable insights, they often treat the different components of the response system separately. There is consequently a need for research that examines investigation, forensic evidence, judicial reasoning, and child protection as interconnected elements of a single criminal justice process, while simultaneously recognising differences between provinces.

A multi-provincial approach is particularly valuable in this context. Examining Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan makes it possible to identify recurring weaknesses that transcend provincial boundaries while also examining variations in institutional and judicial responses. Such comparison does not assume that judicial decisions constitute statistically representative evidence of the entire criminal justice system. Rather, judicial decisions provide legally significant evidence of how institutional practices become visible when cases reach the courts. Judgments may reveal judicial approaches to delayed reporting, child testimony, medical findings, DNA and other forensic evidence, investigative deficiencies, contradictions in prosecution evidence, and sentencing. They may also expose weaknesses in investigation and prosecution that are difficult to identify from statutory provisions alone.

Against this background, the present study examines child rape in Pakistan through a qualitative, doctrinal, and multi-provincial case-study approach, focusing on judicial, investigative, forensic, and child-protection responses in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan. The study treats judicial decisions as legally significant windows into the operation of the broader criminal justice system rather than as statistically representative samples. Through thematic examination of recent judicial decisions, the study analyses how courts respond to delayed reporting, child testimony, medical and forensic evidence, investigative deficiencies, evidentiary contradictions, and sentencing. It further considers what judicial reasoning reveals about institutional coordination and child protection beyond the courtroom. The central argument is that Pakistan's principal challenge is no longer simply the absence of legislation; rather, it is the effective, consistent, and child-sensitive implementation of an increasingly developed legal framework. By placing judicial reasoning

within the wider investigative and child-protection system, the study seeks to identify the institutional gaps that continue to constrain meaningful access to justice for child victims of rape.

2. Literature Review

Child sexual abuse and child rape have increasingly emerged as significant legal, social, public-health, and child-protection concerns in Pakistan. Existing literature demonstrates that these offences cannot be addressed solely through criminal law because victims' experiences are influenced by social stigma, family responses, police practices, medico-legal procedures, judicial attitudes, and access to protection and rehabilitation services. Although Pakistan has strengthened its legal framework through amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code, the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020, and the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021, a substantial gap remains between formal legal protection and practical implementation.

A major theme in the literature is underreporting. Granich et al. (2023) identify stigma, fear of reputational damage, limited awareness, and inadequate institutional mechanisms as important barriers to disclosure. The *State of Children in Pakistan 2024* similarly identifies cultural taboos, family honour, social ostracisation, mistrust of the justice system, and limited awareness of remedies as factors discouraging reporting (National Commission on the Rights of Child [NCRC], 2025). Research also demonstrates that victim-offender relationships, grooming, and trust exploitation influence reporting and prosecution (Ali et al., 2026), while socio-cultural conditions particularly affect reporting in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Irfan, 2024). Consequently, official statistics cannot fully represent the prevalence of child rape, and limited research has examined how underreporting affects subsequent stages of the justice process.

The literature also evaluates Pakistan's legal and institutional framework. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 introduced Special Courts, Anti-Rape Crisis Cells, specialised investigation units, prosecutors, and victim- and witness-protection mechanisms. However, Ali (2024) and NCRC (2025) identify continuing implementation deficiencies and institutional fragmentation. UNICEF further highlights the absence of a fully coordinated child-protection case-management and referral system. Investigation and forensic evidence represent another significant concern. Ali et al. (2026) identify weaknesses in forensic infrastructure, documentation, and socio-legal processes, while Anjum et al. (2026) demonstrate that the evidentiary value of DNA depends on proper collection, preservation, chain of custody, interpretation, and presentation. Child-sensitive interviewing and accurate documentation are also essential to prevent secondary trauma and protect evidentiary reliability (Child Protection and Practice, 2025). Nevertheless, limited research connects investigative weaknesses with later judicial outcomes. Judicial literature indicates increasing recognition of children's vulnerability, but delays, witness intimidation, stigma, limited forensic resources, and inadequate specialised mechanisms remain problematic (Begum & Khan, 2026). Available data also demonstrate substantial case attrition between reporting and conviction. A child-sensitive judicial model therefore requires protection of dignity and

privacy, timely proceedings, witness protection, and sound evaluation of testimonial and scientific evidence.

The literature emphasises that criminal prosecution must be complemented by child-protection services, including medical, psychological, legal, rehabilitative, and protective support. UNICEF's 2026 *Disrupting Harm in Pakistan* further demonstrates emerging technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and the need for trained professionals and coordinated services. Existing literature on child sexual abuse in Pakistan provides valuable insights but remains fragmented across prevalence, social causes, legislation, judicial decisions, forensic evidence, and child protection. Research is also predominantly province-specific, with limited comparative analysis across Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan. Moreover, few studies examine the complete justice pathway from reporting and FIR registration through investigation, medical and forensic examination, prosecution, adjudication, sentencing, and post-trial protection. The implementation of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 also remains insufficiently examined. This study addresses these gaps through a multi-provincial qualitative case-study framework integrating judicial, investigative, forensic, prosecutorial, and child-protection responses.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative doctrinal and comparative case-study methodology to examine judicial, investigative, forensic, prosecutorial, and child-protection responses to child rape in Pakistan. The doctrinal analysis examines relevant constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial decisions, rules, and institutional frameworks, including the Pakistan Penal Code 1860, Qanun-e-Shahadat Order 1984, Code of Criminal Procedure 1898, Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020, and Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021. Particular attention is given to the implementation of specialised investigative and judicial mechanisms established under the Anti-Rape Act. The comparative case-study component focuses on Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan, selected to identify common and province-specific institutional challenges. Cases are purposively selected, with particular emphasis on recent judicial decisions and proceedings from 2025–2026. Each case is examined across seven dimensions: reporting and FIR registration; police investigation; medical and forensic evidence; child testimony and procedural safeguards; prosecution and judicial reasoning; sentencing, compensation and accountability; and child-protection and support services. Documentary data are drawn from reported judgments, legislation, government reports, institutional publications, and peer-reviewed scholarship. Triangulation of these sources strengthens analytical reliability. The study does not claim statistical representativeness; rather, it uses case analysis to identify recurring systemic weaknesses and assess the gap between Pakistan's formal legal protections and their practical implementation.

4. Judicial, Investigative and Child-Protection Responses to Child Rape in Pakistan

Pakistan has progressively developed a more specialised legal and institutional framework for addressing sexual offences against children. This development is reflected particularly in the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021, which introduced institutional mechanisms

intended to address the distinctive evidentiary, procedural, and protection needs associated with rape cases. These mechanisms include Special Sexual Offences Investigation Units (SSOIs), Special Courts, Anti-Rape Crisis Cells (ARCCs), victim and witness protection arrangements, independent support advisers, and specialised procedures for investigation and trial. The Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020 further established a statutory mechanism for responding to missing and abducted children and created an institutional framework for coordinated alerts and recovery efforts (Government of Pakistan, 2020, 2021). The subsequent Anti-Rape Rules have further elaborated procedures relating to investigation, trial, medico-legal assistance, and victim and witness protection (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2022a, 2022b).

These developments indicate a significant movement away from an exclusively conventional criminal-justice approach towards a more specialised and potentially child-sensitive model. Nevertheless, the existence of legislation and specialised institutions does not necessarily translate into effective access to justice. The central issue is increasingly one of implementation. A child-rape case moves through several interconnected stages, beginning with disclosure and reporting and continuing through FIR registration, police investigation, medical and forensic examination, prosecution, judicial proceedings, protection, and post-trial support. A weakness at any one stage may compromise the effectiveness of the entire process. Thus, the adequacy of Pakistan's response should not be assessed merely by the number of laws enacted or institutions created, but by whether these mechanisms function coherently and consistently in practice.

4.1 Judicial Response and Child-Sensitive Adjudication

The judiciary occupies a particularly important position in child-rape cases because judicial proceedings can either protect children from further harm or expose them to additional psychological and social pressures. Children who report sexual abuse may experience fear, shame, confusion, loyalty conflicts, or pressure from family members and communities. Their ability to recall and communicate traumatic events may also be affected by their age and circumstances. Consequently, the judicial process must accommodate the child's vulnerability without compromising the accused's fundamental right to a fair trial.

A child-sensitive approach does not mean lowering the evidentiary threshold applicable to criminal proceedings. Rather, it requires courts to interpret and apply procedural rules in a manner that recognises the particular circumstances in which children give evidence. The Supreme Court of Pakistan has recognised that chronological age alone is not determinative of a child's competence as a witness. In *Raja Khurram Ali Khan and Another v. State*, the Court considered the child's ability to understand questions and provide rational and intelligible responses rather than treating childhood itself as a legal disqualification from giving evidence (*Raja Khurram Ali Khan & Another v. State*, 2020). This approach is significant because it permits courts to evaluate testimonial competence on the basis of actual capacity rather than relying upon an inflexible age-based assumption.

The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 also attempts to institutionalise greater sensitivity within the adjudicatory process. Special Courts and specialised trial procedures recognise that sexual-offence cases require a procedural environment different from ordinary criminal litigation. The Anti-Rape (Trial Procedure) Rules 2022 further provide for structured trial scheduling and procedures intended to facilitate the efficient conduct of proceedings. The Rules provide, among other matters, for trial scheduling after framing of the charge, thereby seeking to reduce unnecessary procedural delay (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2022a).

Privacy is another essential component of child-sensitive adjudication. Disclosure of a child's identity may expose the victim and family to stigma, social exclusion, intimidation, or further psychological harm. Accordingly, restrictions on disclosure and the use of protective procedures such as in-camera proceedings are particularly important in sexual-offence cases. Such measures should, however, be understood as part of a broader child-sensitive judicial model rather than as isolated procedural safeguards. Their effectiveness depends upon the conduct of judges, prosecutors, defence counsel, court staff, and support personnel throughout the proceedings.

The literature on child sexual abuse in Pakistan similarly indicates that access to justice is affected by institutional and procedural weaknesses extending beyond the substantive law. Granich et al. (2023) emphasise that child sexual abuse must be understood within a wider social and institutional environment characterised by underreporting, inadequate protective structures, and weaknesses in intervention and treatment. Recent research from Sindh likewise identifies difficulties relating to judicial responses, child protection, forensic evidence, and the practical ability of child victims to obtain effective access to justice (Begum & Khan, 2026). The implication is that child-sensitive adjudication cannot be achieved simply through the creation of Special Courts; it requires a wider transformation in courtroom practice and institutional culture.

4.2 Police Investigation and Registration of Cases

Police investigation constitutes the first substantive stage at which the formal justice system determines how an allegation of child rape will be documented, investigated, and developed into a prosecutable case. The initial institutional response is therefore critical. Delays in FIR registration, inappropriate questioning, failure to secure the crime scene, inadequate identification of witnesses, incomplete documentation, and weak coordination with medical and forensic personnel can compromise evidence before the matter reaches the prosecution or courts. The problem is particularly significant in child sexual-abuse cases because disclosure may occur after a considerable period. Children may initially remain silent because of fear, dependence upon the perpetrator, threats, shame, or uncertainty about the consequences of disclosure. Granich et al. (2023) identify underreporting and weaknesses in institutional responses as persistent dimensions of child sexual abuse in Pakistan. Consequently, the absence of an immediate complaint cannot, by itself, be treated as evidence that an allegation is inherently unreliable.

The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 seeks to address investigative deficiencies through the establishment of Special Sexual Offences Investigation Units. The statutory model recognises that sexual offences require specialised investigative skills and provides for trained personnel, including preference for female police officers where appropriate (Government of Pakistan, 2021). The purpose of specialisation is not merely administrative. Effective investigation of child rape requires knowledge of trauma-sensitive interviewing, biological evidence, digital evidence, crime-scene management, victim protection, and the particular dynamics of child–offender relationships. A comprehensive investigation should therefore proceed beyond the mere recording of a complainant's statement. Investigators should secure and document the crime scene, identify and interview relevant witnesses, arrange timely medico-legal examination, collect and preserve biological evidence, identify potentially relevant digital or documentary evidence, and record the circumstances in which the allegation was disclosed. The relationship between the child and alleged offender is also relevant because sexual abuse frequently occurs in settings characterised by trust, familiarity, dependency, or authority.

Recent research provides important empirical support for this integrated approach. Ali et al. (2026) analysed child sexual-abuse records from 738 police stations across 38 districts of Punjab covering the period 2014–2023. The study combined police records with forensic and other information to examine victim–offender relationships, forensic evidence, and patterns of offending. Its findings reinforce the importance of treating child sexual abuse as an institutional and evidentiary problem rather than as a matter capable of being resolved through police registration alone. The principal difficulty, therefore, lies in translating specialised investigative structures into effective investigative practice. The formal establishment of SSOIUs does not guarantee adequate staffing, continuous training, effective supervision, or access to medico-legal and forensic facilities. Institutional disparities between provinces and districts may consequently produce unequal investigative outcomes. The implementation of specialised investigation should therefore be evaluated according to the quality, timeliness, and evidentiary integrity of investigations rather than merely according to whether the statutory unit exists.

4.3 Medical and Forensic Evidence

Medical and forensic evidence occupies an increasingly important position in the investigation and adjudication of child-rape cases. Biological material, DNA profiles, medical findings, injury documentation, and other forensic information may assist investigators and courts in establishing links between the victim, accused, and circumstances of an alleged offence. Nevertheless, forensic evidence should not be treated as an automatic substitute for a complete investigation or as an indispensable requirement in every child-rape case. The evidentiary value of DNA, in particular, depends upon the reliability of the process through which biological material is collected, preserved, transported, examined, and presented to the court. A scientifically accurate laboratory result may nevertheless become legally vulnerable if the chain of custody is inadequately documented or if there are doubts regarding contamination, improper storage, delays in collection, or the identity of the individual from whom the sample was obtained.

Recent Pakistani scholarship has highlighted precisely these institutional challenges. Anjum et al. (2026) examine the evidentiary and jurisprudential treatment of DNA profiling in sexual-offence trials and identify continuing difficulties involving chain of custody, judicial interpretation, police capacity, and unequal forensic infrastructure. Their analysis demonstrates that the value of forensic science cannot be separated from the institutional conditions under which evidence is generated and presented. This issue has particular significance in child-rape cases. The absence of biological evidence does not necessarily demonstrate that an allegation is false. Evidence may be unavailable because reporting occurred after a substantial period, biological material may have degraded, the crime scene may not have been preserved, or appropriate samples may not have been collected at the outset. For this reason, judicial assessment should place DNA and other forensic material within the totality of the evidence rather than treating the presence or absence of DNA as determinative in isolation.

Pakistan's legal framework has attempted to strengthen this dimension of the response through the Anti-Rape (Crises Cell and Medico-Legal) Rules 2022. These Rules provide an institutional framework for Anti-Rape Crisis Cells and medico-legal assistance. They contemplate dedicated facilities and immediate assistance, including arrangements intended to facilitate access to medical care following a complaint (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2022b). The forensic response must also be consistent with the dignity and psychological well-being of child victims. Medical examinations should be conducted in a manner that minimises unnecessary distress, protects privacy, and avoids practices that have no legitimate evidentiary justification. The statutory prohibition of the so-called “two-finger test” is therefore particularly important because it represents a shift away from practices that may violate bodily dignity without providing scientifically or legally appropriate evidence concerning consent or sexual history.

Ultimately, forensic reform must extend beyond laboratory capacity. It requires trained first responders, standardised evidence-collection protocols, reliable storage and transportation systems, properly documented chains of custody, competent forensic personnel, and effective communication between investigators, medico-legal practitioners, prosecutors, and courts. Without this interconnected infrastructure, scientific evidence may fail to realise its potential contribution to justice.

4.4 Child Protection, Victim Support and Recovery

An effective response to child rape cannot be confined to criminal investigation and punishment. Child victims may require immediate medical treatment, psychological support, physical protection, legal assistance, family support, educational continuity, and longer-term rehabilitation. A justice system that secures a conviction but leaves the child without protection or psychosocial assistance cannot be regarded as providing a complete child-centred response. The Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020 represents an important component of Pakistan's broader child-protection architecture. The Act establishes a statutory framework for responding to missing and abducted children and provides for the Zainab Alert,

Response and Recovery Agency (ZARRA). The legislation was enacted as Act XV of 2020 and extends throughout Pakistan. Its significance lies in creating a formal mechanism through which information concerning missing or abducted children can be communicated and coordinated with relevant authorities.

The Anti-Rape Act complements this framework through Anti-Rape Crisis Cells, which are designed to provide a coordinated initial response to victims. The Anti-Rape (Crises Cell and Medico-Legal) Rules 2022 envisage an institutional setting in which medical and other immediate assistance can be facilitated. These mechanisms reflect an important conceptual shift: the child should not be treated solely as a source of evidence for the prosecution but as a rights-bearing individual requiring protection and assistance throughout the justice process.

Nevertheless, child-protection responsibilities remain institutionally dispersed. Police authorities, health departments, prosecutors, courts, provincial child-protection institutions, social-welfare departments, and civil-society organisations may each perform different functions. Where these institutions do not operate through an integrated referral and case-management mechanism, the child and family may be required to navigate multiple agencies independently. Such fragmentation can lead to repeated accounts of the incident, delays in medical or psychological assistance, gaps in protection, and uncertainty concerning responsibility for the child's continuing welfare. The problem is therefore not simply the absence of protective institutions but the absence of sufficiently integrated institutional practice. A genuinely child-sensitive system should establish a coordinated pathway beginning with disclosure and continuing through investigation, medical and forensic examination, prosecution, trial, and post-trial recovery. Such an approach would reduce unnecessary repetition and ensure that protection is treated as a continuous obligation rather than an intervention limited to the immediate aftermath of an offence.

4.5 Provincial Dimensions of the Criminal Justice Response

Although major reforms concerning rape and child protection have been enacted at the federal level, their practical operation is significantly influenced by provincial institutional capacity. Police administration, health and medico-legal services, forensic facilities, prosecution structures, social-welfare mechanisms, and access to courts vary across provinces. Consequently, the existence of a formally uniform legal framework does not necessarily produce uniform access to justice. Punjab provides an important example. Ali et al. (2026) examined records from 738 police stations across 38 districts and demonstrated the value of combining police, forensic, and victim offender information when assessing child sexual abuse. The study is particularly relevant to the present analysis because it illustrates the scale of the institutional data required to understand patterns of abuse and the limitations of treating police records as isolated sources of information.

Sindh presents a further dimension of the problem. Begum and Khan (2026) identify challenges relating to judicial responses, child protection, forensic evidence, and access to justice for child victims in Sindh. Their analysis indicates that legislative development must

be accompanied by institutional mechanisms capable of ensuring that child-sensitive principles are applied consistently in judicial practice.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa presents additional challenges associated with geographical accessibility, social conditions, and the availability of specialised services. In districts where travel to police stations, courts, medico-legal facilities, or forensic services is difficult, the formal availability of a legal remedy may have limited practical value. Balochistan presents an even more pronounced institutional-access challenge because geographical dispersion and limited specialised infrastructure can affect the availability and timeliness of investigative, judicial, medical, forensic, and child-protection services.

The provincial comparison therefore reveals an important distinction between legal equality and institutional equality. Children may formally possess the same statutory protections across Pakistan while experiencing substantially different levels of access to those protections in practice. A national legal framework must consequently be accompanied by minimum standards of institutional capacity, while provincial implementation should account for geographical, demographic, and administrative differences.

4.6 The Implementation Gap: From Legislative Reform to Effective Justice

The preceding analysis demonstrates that Pakistan has undergone substantial legislative development in the field of child-rape response. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 introduced specialised institutions and procedures; the subsequent Rules expanded the regulatory framework; and the Zainab Alert Act created a formal mechanism for responding to missing and abducted children. The Ministry of Law and Justice continues to identify and publish rules under the Anti-Rape Act, including rules concerning investigation, trial procedure, medico-legal matters, sex-offender registration, and victim and witness protection.

The principal difficulty is therefore increasingly located at the level of implementation. The effectiveness of a statutory mechanism depends upon whether the personnel responsible for operating it possess adequate training, whether the necessary infrastructure exists, whether institutions communicate effectively, and whether non-compliance produces meaningful accountability. The implementation gap becomes particularly visible when the justice process is examined as a chain. Failure at the reporting stage may prevent the case from entering the system. Failure at the investigative stage may result in lost or contaminated evidence. Delay in medico-legal examination may reduce the availability of relevant evidence. Weak forensic practices may undermine otherwise useful scientific material. Poor coordination between police and prosecution may weaken the presentation of the case. Procedural delay may prolong the child's exposure to trauma. Inadequate protection may create pressure to withdraw or compromise the complaint. Finally, the absence of post-trial psychosocial and social support may leave the child without meaningful recovery.

This interconnectedness means that reform cannot be evaluated through a single indicator such as the number of FIRs registered or convictions obtained. A more meaningful assessment should consider the entire institutional pathway, including the timeliness and quality of FIR

registration, investigation, medico-legal examination, forensic processing, prosecution, judicial proceedings, victim and witness protection, psychosocial support, compensation, and post-trial recovery. The available literature reinforces this conclusion. Granich et al. (2023) identify underreporting, inadequate protective structures, and weaknesses in intervention and treatment as continuing dimensions of child sexual abuse in Pakistan. More recent empirical work has highlighted weaknesses in forensic infrastructure, fragmented documentation, and socio-legal barriers, while research on judicial responses in Sindh has identified continuing obstacles to effective access to justice (Ali et al., 2026; Begum & Khan, 2026).

Accordingly, the principal challenge facing Pakistan is no longer simply the enactment of additional legislation. The more pressing task is to ensure that existing legal protections operate as an integrated system. Specialised investigators must have the resources to conduct competent investigations; medico-legal and forensic services must be accessible and reliable; prosecutors and judges must be trained in child-sensitive procedures; protection mechanisms must operate throughout the proceedings; and federal and provincial institutions must be subject to effective monitoring. The overall assessment is therefore that Pakistan has made meaningful progress in constructing a specialised legal architecture for responding to child rape, but substantial institutional weaknesses continue to limit its practical effectiveness. The movement from legislative reform to effective justice requires an implementation-centred approach in which investigation, forensic science, prosecution, adjudication, child protection, and post-trial support are treated as mutually dependent components of a single justice process. The protection of children should consequently be measured not only by whether an offender is prosecuted or convicted, but also by whether the child can safely disclose abuse, obtain timely assistance, participate in proceedings without avoidable secondary victimisation, and receive meaningful protection and support throughout and after the criminal justice process.

5. Provincial Case Studies: Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan

The provincial case-study analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of Pakistan's response to child rape cannot be assessed exclusively through federal legislation. Although the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 establishes a broadly uniform legal framework, the practical operation of that framework is influenced by provincial police structures, prosecution services, medico-legal facilities, forensic capacity, judicial administration, child-protection institutions, and socio-cultural conditions. The 2025 data published by the National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC) illustrate considerable differences in the number of recorded sexual offences involving children across provinces. Punjab recorded 12,800 cases, Sindh 3,187, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) 855, and Balochistan 75 cases. These figures should not, however, be interpreted as a direct measure of the actual prevalence of child sexual abuse because variations in population size, reporting practices, access to police services, institutional capacity, and social stigma may substantially influence official statistics (National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC), 2026).

The case studies therefore focus not simply on the number of reported offences but on the functioning of the criminal justice and child-protection system across seven dimensions:

reporting and FIR registration; police investigation; medical and forensic evidence; child testimony and procedural safeguards; prosecution and judicial reasoning; sentencing and accountability; and child-protection and support services. This approach makes it possible to identify both common structural weaknesses and province-specific institutional differences.

5.1 Punjab

Punjab represents the most significant case study because of its large population and the comparatively high volume of reported child sexual offences. NCRC data for 2025 recorded 12,800 children involved in sexual offences under relevant provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code in Punjab, substantially higher than the numbers recorded in the other provinces (NCRC, 2026). The higher number should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that Punjab has a higher underlying incidence of child sexual abuse. Rather, it may partly reflect the province's population size, extensive police infrastructure, greater institutional accessibility, and comparatively greater likelihood that offences will be formally reported. Recent research provides important insight into the institutional challenges underlying Punjab's response. Ali et al. (2026), using police records from 738 police stations across 38 districts of Punjab, examined victim offender relationships and the implications of child sexual abuse for child-protection services. The study identified weaknesses in forensic infrastructure, fragmented documentation, socio-legal barriers, and inadequate integration of police, forensic, and judicial perspectives. These findings suggest that the principal challenge is not simply the absence of legislation but the ability of multiple institutions to work together throughout the criminal justice process.

The investigative stage is particularly important. Child sexual abuse cases may require the simultaneous collection of medical, biological, forensic, testimonial, and documentary evidence. Where evidence is collected late or poorly documented, the prosecution may face difficulties at trial. The Punjab case study consequently demonstrates the importance of specialised investigation and effective coordination between police investigators, medico-legal officers, forensic laboratories, and prosecutors. The judicial response also reveals the importance of child testimony and evidentiary safeguards. Pakistani courts have repeatedly emphasised that the competence of a child witness depends upon sufficient understanding and the ability to provide rational answers rather than age alone. In *Rehmat Ali v. The State*, the Supreme Court-related case-law material emphasised the importance of conducting a rationality test before recording a child's testimony and noted that failure to assess testimonial capacity may require stronger corroboration of the child's evidence (Lahore High Court Research Centre, 2025). This principle is particularly relevant to child rape trials because judicial assessment of the child's testimony must avoid both extremes: treating childhood as a reason to reject testimony automatically, or accepting testimony without appropriate assessment of competence and reliability.

The Punjab experience also highlights the importance of timely judicial proceedings. The existence of specialised courts and statutory procedures does not necessarily eliminate delays. The National Commission for the Status of Women reported substantial differences in the

movement of rape cases through registration, challan, investigation, trial, and final judgment across provinces, illustrating that the transition from registration to adjudication remains a major institutional challenge (National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), 2025). Punjab therefore demonstrates a paradox. It possesses comparatively extensive institutional infrastructure and records a large number of reported cases, yet the scale of the caseload creates significant pressure on investigative, forensic, prosecutorial, and judicial institutions. The province's experience indicates that increasing institutional capacity must be accompanied by improved coordination, evidence management, specialised training, child-sensitive procedures, and systematic case monitoring.

5.2 Sindh

Sindh provides an important contrasting case because recent evidence indicates improvements in the investigation and adjudication of rape cases following the operationalisation of specialised mechanisms. In 2025, Sindh registered 178 rape cases, including 25 cases involving rape of minors under section 376(3) of the Pakistan Penal Code. Of those 25 minor-rape cases, 12 resulted in convictions and seven in acquittals, according to data reported from official provincial sources (Ali, 2026). The reported improvement is associated with several institutional developments, including Special Sexual Offences Investigation Units (SSOIs), specialised training, improved evidence handling, and greater coordination between investigators and medico-legal officers. According to the Sindh police, specialised investigators received training concerning evidence collection and case-file preparation, while SSOIs developed closer coordination with medico-legal officers for timely preservation and forensic examination of evidence (Ali, 2026).

This development is particularly relevant to the implementation-gap argument advanced in this article. The statutory establishment of specialised investigation units is important, but their effectiveness depends upon operational capacity. Sindh provides preliminary evidence that specialised institutional structures may contribute to improved criminal justice outcomes when accompanied by training, forensic coordination, and prosecutorial follow-up. Nevertheless, significant problems remain. The overall rape caseload in Sindh continues to experience substantial delays. Official data reported in 2026 indicated that 327 rape cases were already pending at the beginning of 2025, while 228 new cases were registered during the year. Only 198 cases were disposed of, leaving a significant backlog (Ali, 2026). Thus, an increase in conviction rates should not be interpreted as evidence that the entire justice system has become effective.

The judicial dimension is similarly complex. Recent scholarship examining the judicial response to child sexual abuse in Sindh identified continuing challenges involving child testimony, medical and forensic evidence, victim protection, confidentiality, delayed investigation, witness intimidation, social stigma, and limited specialised resources (Begum & Khan, 2026). These challenges demonstrate that conviction rates represent only one component of justice. A child-sensitive justice system must also ensure that the victim is protected, supported, and able to participate without unnecessary trauma. Sindh therefore provides a useful example of how institutional specialisation can improve aspects of the

criminal justice response while simultaneously demonstrating the persistence of systemic delay and victim-support deficiencies. Its experience suggests that specialised investigation should be accompanied by effective case-flow management, judicial capacity, forensic resources, and integrated child-protection services.

5.3 Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa presents a different institutional context. In 2025, the NCRC recorded 855 children involved in sexual offences under the relevant provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code in KP (NCRC, 2026). The comparatively lower number than Punjab and Sindh should not automatically be interpreted as indicating lower prevalence. Geographic accessibility, social attitudes, reporting practices, institutional reach, and the availability of specialised services may all influence official statistics.

A significant challenge in KP is the accessibility of specialised criminal justice and child-protection services. The province contains geographically remote and mountainous areas in which access to police stations, hospitals, medico-legal officers, forensic facilities, courts, psychologists, and social-welfare services may be more difficult than in major urban centres. Consequently, the formal existence of legal protections does not necessarily translate into equal practical access to those protections. The Peshawar High Court has also developed mechanisms addressing complaints relating to the registration of rape cases. Its human-rights procedures provide that where police refuse to register a rape case, complainants may be advised to approach the relevant judicial authority under section 22-A of the Code of Criminal Procedure or pursue a private complaint mechanism (Peshawar High Court, n.d.). This institutional mechanism is significant because FIR registration represents the first formal gateway into the criminal justice system. Refusal or delay at this stage may prevent the effective preservation of evidence and delay access to medical and protective services.

Judicial treatment of child evidence is another important consideration in KP. The courts must assess the competency and reliability of child witnesses while ensuring that the procedural process does not unnecessarily expose children to intimidation or repeated examination. Recent Pakistani case law reinforces the importance of the rationality test and careful judicial assessment of a child's capacity to understand and communicate evidence (Lahore High Court Research Centre, 2025). The province therefore demonstrates that child-sensitive justice requires both legal safeguards and accessible institutions. Specialised investigation units and courts cannot fully address the problem if victims in remote districts face difficulty reaching those institutions. KP's case study consequently highlights the importance of decentralised medico-legal services, mobile or district-level forensic capacity, trained investigators, psychological support, and effective referral mechanisms.

5.4 Balochistan

Balochistan presents the most pronounced challenge of institutional accessibility among the four provinces examined in this study. NCRC data recorded 75 children involved in sexual offences under relevant PPC provisions in 2025, the lowest provincial figure in the country

(NCRC, 2026). Again, the relatively small number of recorded cases should not be interpreted as proof of a correspondingly low level of child sexual abuse. The province's extensive geographical area, dispersed population, limited institutional infrastructure, and barriers to reporting may contribute to substantial under-registration. The judicial record demonstrates that sexual-offence litigation nevertheless reaches the provincial superior courts. The High Court of Balochistan's published 2025 judgments include a number of criminal matters involving the State and accused persons, illustrating the continuing role of the provincial judiciary in reviewing criminal convictions and proceedings (High Court of Balochistan, 2025).

A particular difficulty for Balochistan is the geographical concentration of specialised services. Child rape investigations may require rapid medical examination, biological sample collection, forensic testing, psychological support, and access to prosecutors and courts. Where these services are concentrated in major urban areas, victims from remote districts may face delays that can negatively affect both evidence collection and child welfare. The provincial case study therefore illustrates the distinction between formal equality and substantive access to justice. Federal legislation may establish identical rights for children throughout Pakistan, but the practical ability to exercise those rights depends upon proximity to institutions and the availability of trained personnel. In Balochistan, strengthening district-level capacity may therefore be more important than simply establishing additional formal rules.

The High Court's publicly available case-law resources also demonstrate that sexual-offence litigation continues to generate appellate questions concerning evidence, criminal procedure, and the application of penal provisions (High Court of Balochistan, 2025). This suggests that judicial development must be accompanied by improvements at the investigation and trial stages so that appellate courts are not required to remedy weaknesses that could have been prevented earlier in the criminal justice process.

5.5 Provincial Comparative Findings

The four provincial case studies reveal both common patterns and significant institutional differences. The principal commonality is that all provinces operate within a legal framework that increasingly recognises the need for specialised responses to sexual offences. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021 provides the basic statutory architecture, while provincial institutions are responsible for much of its practical implementation. The first major finding is that reporting levels cannot be treated as a straightforward measure of prevalence. Punjab recorded 12,800 children involved in reported sexual offences under relevant PPC provisions in 2025, compared with 3,187 in Sindh, 855 in KP, and 75 in Balochistan (NCRC, 2026). The substantial variation may reflect population differences, but it may also reflect differences in reporting, police accessibility, social stigma, and institutional capacity. Therefore, lower recorded numbers should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of better child protection.

Second, specialised investigation appears to be an important institutional reform. The Sindh experience suggests that SSOIUs, investigator training, improved evidence handling, and coordination with medico-legal officers can contribute to improved outcomes (Ali, 2026). However, specialisation must be supported by adequate staffing, forensic facilities, supervision, and prosecutorial coordination.

Third, forensic capacity remains central to effective investigation. DNA and other biological evidence may provide important corroboration, but its evidentiary value depends upon timely collection, preservation, chain of custody, laboratory capacity, and judicial interpretation. Recent Pakistani scholarship continues to identify institutional and evidentiary challenges in the use of DNA profiling in sexual-offence trials (Anjum et al., 2026).

Fourth, judicial effectiveness cannot be measured solely by conviction rates. Conviction rates may increase while substantial case backlogs remain. Sindh provides a clear illustration: despite an improvement in the reported conviction rate, hundreds of cases remained pending and only a portion of the overall caseload was disposed of during the year (Ali, 2026). The appropriate evaluation therefore requires consideration of case duration, quality of investigation, victim protection, evidentiary integrity, procedural fairness, and the child's psychological well-being.

Fifth, child testimony remains a critical judicial issue. Pakistani courts have recognised that a child may be a competent witness where the child demonstrates sufficient understanding and rationality. At the same time, judicial failure to conduct an appropriate assessment may affect the evidentiary weight of the testimony (Lahore High Court Research Centre, 2025). This demonstrates the need for judicial training concerning child psychology, trauma-informed questioning, testimonial competence, and the avoidance of stereotypical assumptions about children's behaviour.

The comparison demonstrates that institutional inequality is a central child-protection problem. Children in major urban centres may have greater access to specialised courts, investigators, hospitals, medico-legal officers, forensic laboratories, prosecutors, and psychological services than children living in remote areas. The challenge is therefore not merely to harmonise the law but to ensure comparable institutional capacity across provinces and districts.

The cross-provincial analysis consequently supports the central argument of this study: Pakistan has made substantial progress in developing a formal legal framework for addressing child rape, but the effectiveness of that framework depends upon the capacity of provincial institutions to translate statutory rights into accessible, timely, evidence-based, and child-sensitive justice. The next stage of reform should therefore focus less on the creation of additional legislation and more on implementation, institutional coordination, forensic capacity, judicial specialisation, victim support, and measurable accountability.

Table 2**Provincial Distribution of Recorded Child Sexual Offences, 2025**

Province/Region	Number of Children Recorded	Approximate Share of Total	Comparative Observation
Punjab	12,800	73.78%	Highest recorded number; reflects both population size and substantial reporting/institutional activity
Sindh	3,187	18.37%	Second-highest recorded number; continuing institutional and case-management pressures
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	855	4.93%	Lower recorded number but significant geographical and accessibility barriers
Islamabad Capital Territory	431	2.48%	Smaller jurisdiction with comparatively concentrated institutional resources
Balochistan	75	0.43%	Lowest recorded number; substantial concerns regarding geographical access and institutional capacity
Total	17,348	100%	Police-recorded child sexual offences under relevant PPC provisions

The data reveal a pronounced reporting paradox. Punjab's substantially higher recorded figure should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that child sexual violence is necessarily more prevalent there than in the other provinces. Rather, the figures must be understood within the broader institutional environment in which cases are reported, registered, investigated, medically examined, forensically processed, prosecuted, and adjudicated. Conversely, the very low number recorded in Balochistan should not be interpreted as evidence of a correspondingly low level of victimisation. Geographic distance, limited institutional infrastructure, social stigma, restricted access to specialised services, and barriers to reporting may suppress the number of cases entering the formal criminal justice system. This distinction is particularly important for a comparative legal analysis. A province with a high number of registered cases may have a comparatively accessible reporting system, whereas a province with fewer registered cases may experience substantial under-reporting. Consequently, recorded caseload should be treated as an indicator of the formal justice system's workload rather than as a direct indicator of the underlying prevalence of child rape.

5.6 Provincial Differences in Institutional Response

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that the principal differences between provinces arise not necessarily from the formal legal framework but from the institutional capacity available to implement it.

In Punjab, the scale of the recorded caseload creates significant demands on police, prosecution, medico-legal services, forensic laboratories, and courts. Recent research based on police records from 738 police stations across 38 districts of Punjab identifies under-reporting, fragmented documentation, weaknesses in forensic infrastructure, and socio-legal barriers as important limitations affecting the effective investigation and prosecution of child sexual abuse (Ali et al., 2026). The large number of recorded cases therefore requires not merely additional policing resources but an integrated system capable of ensuring continuity between investigation, medical examination, forensic analysis, prosecution, and child protection.

Sindh presents a somewhat different institutional pattern. Police data reported for 2025 indicate a substantial rape caseload, including cases involving minors, while the establishment of Specialised Sexual Offences Investigation Units (SSOIs) has been associated with efforts to improve investigation and coordination. Nevertheless, the persistence of acquittals and case backlogs demonstrates that specialised investigation alone cannot guarantee effective accountability. Investigation must be connected with timely medico-legal examination, reliable forensic evidence, effective prosecution, child-sensitive testimony, and efficient judicial case management.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the comparatively lower recorded number of cases must be interpreted against the province's geographical and institutional characteristics. Remote and mountainous areas may face difficulties in accessing police stations, medico-legal facilities, forensic services, prosecutors, and specialised courts. Thus, the central issue is not simply whether the legal framework exists, but whether children living in geographically disadvantaged areas can access the institutions through which that framework operates.

The situation in Balochistan illustrates this problem particularly clearly. The province recorded only 75 children involved in child sexual offences in the NCRC's 2025 provincial dataset. However, the extremely low recorded figure should be approached cautiously because geographical dispersion, transportation difficulties, limited institutional infrastructure, and restricted access to specialised services may reduce reporting and case registration. The Balochistan case therefore demonstrates the distinction between formal legal equality and substantive access to justice.

5.7 Comparative Implementation Gap

The principal finding of the multi-provincial case study is that Pakistan's child-rape justice system suffers less from the complete absence of legislation than from an implementation gap between legal standards and institutional practice. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act

2021 represents an important national reform because it provides a specialised framework for the investigation and trial of rape and sexual abuse offences involving women and children. However, legislation alone cannot ensure effective justice. The actual outcome of a case depends upon a continuous chain of institutional processes beginning with reporting and FIR registration and extending through investigation, medical examination, forensic analysis, prosecution, child testimony, trial, judgment, victim protection, and post-trial support.

Table 2**Child-Rape Justice Chain and Principal Implementation Risks**

Justice Stage	Required Response	Institutional	Principal Risk	Implementation	Potential Consequence
Reporting/FIR	Accessible and child-sensitive registration	and child-	Stigma, family refusal/delay registration	pressure, in	Under-reporting and loss of evidence
Investigation	Specialised and trained investigators	and trained	Lack of expertise, excessive caseloads		Weak investigation
Medical examination	Prompt and child-sensitive medico-legal examination	and child-medico-legal	Delay or inadequate facilities		Loss or degradation of biological evidence
Forensic analysis	Proper preservation and laboratory examination	collection, and	Chain-of-custody problems and laboratory capacity	and unequal	Reduced evidentiary value
Prosecution	Early and effective prosecutor involvement	and effective	Weak coordination between police and prosecution		Case delays and evidentiary weaknesses
Child testimony	Trauma-informed and child-sensitive procedures	and	Secondary victimisation and intimidation		Reduced participation and unreliable testimony
Trial	Expeditious and specialised adjudication	and	Backlogs and procedural delay		Prolonged trauma and reduced confidence
Protection	Protection from intimidation and retaliation	from and	Inadequate protective mechanisms		Withdrawal or non-cooperation
Post-trial support	Psychosocial, medical and social reintegration services	medical reintegration	Fragmented protection response	child-	Incomplete recovery and reintegration

The comparative evidence therefore supports an integrated child-sensitive justice model in which criminal justice and child-protection institutions operate as interconnected components rather than isolated institutions.

5.8 Comparative Finding

The provincial evidence establishes three principal findings.

First, provincial differences in recorded cases do not necessarily represent differences in the actual prevalence of child rape. The 2025 NCRC data demonstrate substantial variation in police-recorded child sexual offences, but these figures are influenced by population size, reporting practices, institutional accessibility, and under-reporting.

Second, specialised institutions are necessary but insufficient. Specialised investigation units, special courts, forensic laboratories, and trained personnel can improve the quality and speed of criminal justice responses, but their effectiveness depends upon coordination across the entire justice chain.

Third, forensic and child-protection capacity constitutes a central determinant of effective justice. A case may begin with successful FIR registration but fail to produce accountability because evidence is collected improperly, medical examination is delayed, forensic analysis is unavailable or unreliable, prosecution is delayed, or the child is exposed to repeated and traumatising procedures.

Accordingly, the principal comparative conclusion is that Pakistan requires a shift from a law-centred model of child-rape response to an implementation-centred and child-sensitive model of justice. The federal legal framework should establish minimum national standards, while provincial institutions must be provided with sufficient resources, specialised personnel, forensic capacity, judicial infrastructure, and child-protection mechanisms to implement those standards effectively.

6. Policy Recommendations

6.1 Establish National Minimum Standards with Provincial Implementation

The federal government should establish national minimum standards for the investigation and prosecution of child rape under the *Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021*, while provincial governments should retain responsibility for implementation in accordance with their institutional capacities and local conditions. These standards should prescribe measurable timelines for FIR registration, medico-legal examination, forensic submission, investigation, prosecution, and trial. Clear benchmarks would reduce provincial disparities and establish a consistent minimum level of protection for child victims throughout Pakistan.

6.2 Strengthen Specialised Investigation Units

Specialised sexual-offence investigation units should be adequately staffed, properly resourced, and subject to continuous professional training. Training should cover child-sensitive interviewing, trauma-informed investigation, evidence preservation, digital evidence, forensic procedures, and victim protection. Performance assessment should move beyond the number of FIRs registered and instead consider investigation quality, evidentiary integrity, prosecution outcomes, case completion, and child safety. This would encourage a shift from quantitative policing indicators towards meaningful investigative effectiveness.

6.3 Integrate Medical and Forensic Responses

Every child sexual-violence investigation should ensure timely medico-legal examination and appropriate forensic evidence collection. Standardised national protocols should govern the collection, packaging, transportation, storage, and analysis of biological and other forensic evidence. Particular attention should be given to maintaining a properly documented chain of custody, as weaknesses at this stage may undermine otherwise credible evidence during judicial proceedings. Greater coordination among police, medico-legal officers, forensic laboratories, and prosecutors is therefore essential.

6.4 Strengthen Child-Sensitive Judicial Procedures

Courts should adopt procedures that minimise the secondary trauma experienced by child victims during criminal proceedings. Children should be protected from unnecessary repeated appearances, intimidating questioning, hostile courtroom environments, and avoidable confrontation with alleged perpetrators. Child-sensitive procedures should be implemented consistently across provinces through specialised judicial training and appropriate support for judges, prosecutors, defence counsel, court staff, and child-support personnel. The objective should be to reconcile the accused's fair-trial rights with the child's dignity, safety, and right to participate in proceedings without unnecessary psychological harm.

6.5 Develop Transparent Case-Flow Monitoring

A coordinated national and provincial case-monitoring mechanism should track child-rape cases from FIR registration through final judgment. The system should record delays at each stage, including investigation, medico-legal examination, forensic processing, prosecution, and trial. Disaggregated case-flow data would enable authorities to identify specific institutional bottlenecks and resource deficiencies rather than evaluating the criminal justice system solely through conviction rates. Regular publication of anonymised performance data would also strengthen institutional transparency and accountability.

6.6 Integrate Criminal Justice with Child Protection

Criminal prosecution should be accompanied by a comprehensive child-protection response. Child victims should have access to psychosocial counselling, medical treatment, temporary

protection where required, educational assistance, and appropriate family support. Child-protection authorities should therefore be formally integrated into the criminal justice process rather than functioning as a parallel and disconnected system. A coordinated referral mechanism should ensure that the child's protection and welfare continue throughout the investigation, prosecution, and post-trial stages.

6.7 Establish a National Accountability Framework

Implementation of child-rape legislation should be subjected to regular and independent monitoring. Annual provincial performance reports should assess FIR registration, investigation timelines, medico-legal and forensic processing, prosecution, trial duration, conviction and acquittal patterns, victim protection, and access to psychosocial services. An independent accountability mechanism could use these indicators to compare institutional performance across provinces, identify persistent implementation gaps, and recommend targeted reforms. Such a framework would transform legislative commitments into measurable institutional responsibilities and promote sustained improvement in Pakistan's response to child rape.

7. Conclusion

Child rape remains one of the most serious violations of children's fundamental rights and presents Pakistan's criminal justice system with a challenge that extends well beyond the punishment of individual offenders. This study examined the response to child rape through a qualitative, doctrinal, and multi-provincial analysis of judicial, investigative, forensic, and child-protection mechanisms in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Islamabad Capital Territory. The analysis demonstrates that Pakistan has made considerable progress in developing a specialised legal framework, particularly through the Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020 and the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021. The establishment of specialised investigation units, Special Courts, Anti-Rape Crisis Cells, victim and witness protection mechanisms, and specialised procedural rules represents an important shift towards a more responsive criminal justice framework.

However, the central finding of this study is that Pakistan's child-rape justice deficit is primarily an implementation deficit. The existence of legislation has not consistently produced effective or equal access to justice across jurisdictions. Children continue to encounter difficulties at several interconnected stages of the justice process, including reporting, FIR registration, police investigation, medico-legal examination, forensic processing, prosecution, judicial proceedings, protection, and post-trial support. These weaknesses cannot be understood independently because failure at one stage may adversely affect the effectiveness of subsequent stages. For example, delay in reporting or medical examination may affect the availability of forensic evidence, inadequate investigation may weaken prosecution, and inadequate victim protection may discourage continued participation in proceedings.

The judicial analysis demonstrates that courts have increasingly adopted approaches capable of recognising the particular vulnerability of child victims. Judicial reasoning concerning

delayed reporting, child testimony, medical evidence, and forensic material indicates a growing recognition that child sexual abuse must be assessed within its social and psychological context. The treatment of delayed disclosure is particularly important because children may remain silent because of fear, stigma, family pressure, dependency, threats, or their relationship with the alleged offender. Similarly, the absence of physical injuries or biological evidence should not automatically determine the credibility of an allegation where other evidence is available. A genuinely child-sensitive judicial approach must therefore reconcile the accused's constitutional fair-trial rights with the child's dignity, privacy, safety, and meaningful participation in the proceedings.

The investigative findings reveal a continuing need to strengthen specialised police responses. The creation of Special Sexual Offences Investigation Units represents an important institutional reform, but statutory establishment alone cannot guarantee effective investigation. Investigators require appropriate training, staffing, supervision, evidence-preservation capacity, child-sensitive interviewing skills, and access to medico-legal and forensic services. The Punjab evidence is particularly significant in this regard. Recent research based on records from 738 police stations across 38 districts demonstrates the importance of integrating police, forensic, and judicial information when examining child sexual abuse. The findings also point to weaknesses in forensic infrastructure, fragmented documentation, and insufficient institutional integration. These observations support the broader conclusion that the effectiveness of specialised investigation depends upon operational capacity rather than merely upon the formal existence of specialised units.

Forensic evidence presents a similar institutional challenge. DNA and other biological evidence can make an important contribution to the investigation and adjudication of child-rape cases, but its evidentiary value depends upon the reliability of the entire chain through which evidence is collected, preserved, transported, analysed, and presented before the court. Weak chain-of-custody procedures, delays, contamination, inadequate storage, limited laboratory capacity, and poor communication between investigators and forensic institutions may reduce the practical value of otherwise significant scientific evidence. Consequently, forensic reform must be understood as an institutional process involving police officers, medico-legal practitioners, forensic laboratories, prosecutors, and courts rather than as a laboratory issue alone. The provincial analysis further demonstrates that legal uniformity does not necessarily produce institutional equality. The 2025 data recorded 17,348 children involved in relevant sexual offences across the examined jurisdictions. Punjab recorded 12,800 children, followed by Sindh with 3,187, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 855, Islamabad Capital Territory with 431, and Balochistan with 75. Punjab therefore accounted for approximately 73.78% of the recorded total, while Sindh accounted for approximately 18.37%, KP 4.93%, ICT 2.48%, and Balochistan 0.43%.

These figures must, however, be interpreted cautiously. They represent recorded cases entering the formal system and should not be treated as direct estimates of the actual prevalence of child rape or child sexual abuse. Differences in population, reporting practices, institutional accessibility, police capacity, social stigma, geographical conditions, and availability of specialised services can substantially influence the number of cases formally

recorded. The considerably higher figure in Punjab may partly reflect its population and greater institutional and reporting capacity, whereas the much lower figure recorded in Balochistan cannot safely be interpreted as demonstrating a correspondingly lower incidence of abuse. The data therefore reveal a reporting and institutional-access paradox: a higher recorded caseload may indicate greater institutional accessibility, while a lower recorded caseload may partly reflect barriers that prevent cases from entering the formal justice system.

The provincial comparison nevertheless provides important evidence concerning the unequal practical operation of the legal framework. Punjab demonstrates the significance of forensic and institutional coordination; Sindh illustrates both the potential benefits of specialised investigative mechanisms and the persistence of case backlogs and victim-support deficiencies; KP highlights geographical accessibility and the difficulty of delivering specialised services to remote areas; and Balochistan demonstrates the particularly serious consequences that geographical dispersion and limited institutional capacity can have for access to justice. These differences show that the effectiveness of child-rape legislation must be assessed not merely according to whether legal safeguards formally exist but according to whether children can actually reach and benefit from those safeguards. Child protection must consequently be treated as an integral component of criminal justice rather than as a separate welfare concern. A child who reports rape may require immediate medical assistance, psychological counselling, physical protection, legal support, educational continuity, and family assistance. The criminal justice process should therefore be connected to a coordinated child-protection and referral system capable of following the child's needs from disclosure through investigation, prosecution, trial, and post-trial recovery. Fragmentation between police, health services, forensic institutions, prosecutors, courts, and child-protection agencies can place additional burdens upon victims and may result in repeated accounts, delayed assistance, or gaps in protection.

The findings also demonstrate that conviction rates and sentencing outcomes, although important, are insufficient measures of an effective child-rape justice system. Justice should be evaluated across the complete institutional pathway. Relevant indicators include the timeliness and quality of FIR registration, investigation, medico-legal examination, forensic processing, prosecution, and trial; the availability of victim and witness protection; the quality of child-sensitive judicial procedures; access to psychosocial services; and the availability of meaningful post-trial support. Such indicators would provide a more accurate assessment of whether legislative reforms are producing substantive improvements in children's access to justice. Accordingly, Pakistan's next phase of reform should move from legislative expansion towards implementation, coordination, and accountability. Federal legislation should establish minimum national standards, while provincial institutions should be equipped with the personnel, infrastructure, training, and resources necessary to implement those standards effectively. Specialised investigation units should be adequately staffed and continuously trained. Medico-legal and forensic systems should operate through reliable evidence-collection and chain-of-custody procedures. Courts should consistently apply child-sensitive procedures while preserving the fair-trial rights of accused persons. Finally, criminal justice

institutions and child-protection agencies should operate through integrated referral and case-management mechanisms.

In conclusion, Pakistan has developed a considerably stronger legal architecture for responding to child rape, but the existence of progressive legislation has not yet ensured consistent substantive protection for all children. The evidence examined in this study demonstrates that the principal challenge lies in converting statutory commitments into effective institutional practice. A sustainable response requires law, investigation, forensic science, prosecution, child-sensitive adjudication, victim protection, psychological support, and rehabilitation to function as interconnected elements of a single justice framework. Ultimately, the effectiveness of Pakistan's response should not be measured only by the number of cases registered, prosecutions undertaken, or convictions secured. It should also be measured by whether children can safely disclose abuse, obtain timely and competent assistance, participate in proceedings without avoidable secondary victimisation, receive meaningful protection, and access the support necessary for recovery and reintegration.

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