

Exploring Child Protection Systems in Sindh, Pakistan: Gaps, Challenges, and Social Work Responses

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Exploring Child Protection Systems in Sindh, Pakistan: Gaps, Challenges, and Social Work Responses

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Abstract

Child protection in Sindh Pakistan remains under-resourced and fragmented, faced by legislative inconsistencies, institutional capacity deficits and marginalization of Social Work as a professional discipline. Despite constitutional provisions and provincial child protection legislation, millions of children across Sindh, continue to face abuse, neglect, trafficking, child marriage and child labour with limited access to formal protective services. Present study examines the structural gaps and operational challenges in child protection services in Sindh and investigates the current and potential roles of social workers and civil society organizations in addressing these gaps. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi structured in-depth interviews with eighteen (18) purposively selected participants. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke. The study revealed critical system failures, lack of trained Social Workers, Stigma surrounding child abuse and weak inter-agency coordination. Child protection services demands an integrated approach combining legislative reforms, professional capacity building, community sensitization, and strengthening inter-agency coordination. The study offers actionable recommendations for policy makers, social workers, practitioners and civil society.

Keywords: Child Protection, Sindh Pakistan, Social Work Practice, Institutional Gaps, Challenges.

Introduction

Children constitute approximately 44% of Pakistan's population, making child welfare country's most pressing social policy imperatives (UNICEF, 2023). Even with this demographic reality, child protection systems across the country remain chronically underfunded, institutionally fragmented, and socially contested. Sindh is Pakistan's second most populous province with over 50 million inhabitants presents a particularly stark illustration of this systematic neglect. Child protection landscapes marked by yawning gaps between legislative promise and ground reality as it homes some of the country's highest rates of child labour, child marriage, abuse and trafficking (SPARC, 2022).

¹⁷ The Sindh Child Protection Authority (SCPA) was formally established under the Sindh Child Protection Act of 2011, representing a legislative milestone in the province's commitment to child rights. However, over a decade after the Act's passage operational capacity remains severely limited, case management systems are basic, and trained child protection professionals are in acute short supply, particularly in rural districts (HRCP, 2022). This institutional deficit is compounded by deeply embedded socio-cultural norms that normalize child labour as economic necessity, treat child marriage as a family prerogative, and child sexual abuse is always concealed in silence and stigma. Social work the profession that is most directly concerned in child protection practice globally occupies ²⁴ ambiguous and under-recognized position in Pakistan's social service architecture. Despite the establishment of university-level Social Work programs in Sindh, the profession lacks statutory recognition, a regulatory council, and professional accreditation frameworks, limiting its ³⁷ capacity to mount a coherent institutional response to child protection failures (Siddiqui, 2019). Civil society organizations, NGO's and community-based organizations (CBOs), have partially filled this vacuum, through their reach remains geographically uneven and financially vulnerable.

This study investigates the structural ² gaps and operational challenges in child protection services in Sindh, Pakistan, with the specific focus on the responses both actual and ⁴¹ potential of social work practitioners and related civil society actors. Drawing on qualitative data collected through semi-structures in-depth interviews conducted across two districts, the study seeks to generate an empirically grounded, contextually sensitive analysis that can inform both policy and practice.

¹⁴ 1.1 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the primary structural and operational gaps in child protection services in Sindh, Pakistan?
- What socio-cultural institutional challenges impede effective child protection practice in the province?
- How are social workers and civil society organizations responding to identified child protection challenges?
- What policy and practice reforms are needed ² to strengthen child protection system in Sindh?

Literature Review

2.1 Child Protection: Global and Regional Frameworks

⁸ The convention of the rights of child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and notified by Pakistan in 1990, establishes the fundamental international normative framework for child protection. The CRC articulates children's rights to protection from exploitations, abuse, neglect, and violence, and mandates state parties to develop legislative, administrative, and pragmatic measures to give effect to these rights (United Nation, 1989). The subsequent ¹⁶ adoption of optional protocols on the sale of children and child sexual exploitation, and the sustainable development goal ^{16.2} which calls for the end of abuse, trafficking and exploitation and all forms of violence against children reinforces the global consensus on child protection as a development imperative.

Bhat and Bhat (2020) historically characterized ⁴²child protection systems in the context of South Asian region as a welfare-to-rights transition deficit' a pattern whereby states formally adopt right based child protection frameworks while retaining structurally inadequate welfare-era institutions and funding mechanisms. The architecture of Pakistan's child protection is similar and also confirms to this same pattern, with multiple pieces of legislation existing alongside limited implementation capacity and inter-agency coordination (Ali & Khattak, 2021).

2.2 Child Protection in Pakistan: Legislative Landscape

Pakistan's constitutional frameworks provides important ³⁰legal protections, but these protections are not comprehensive, Article ³5-A was inserted in the constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, through the 18th constitutional amendment in 2010, it guarantees the right to free and compulsory education for children aged 5 to 16. The prohibition of the employment of children Act 1991 restricts child labour in hazardous and dangerous occupations, while the provision of trafficking in persons act 2018 addresses child trafficking. After the devolution of social protection functions under ²⁶the 18th amendment, Sindh has enacted relatively progressive legislative framework, including the Sindh Child Protection Act 2011, Sindh Child Marriage Restraining ¹⁵Act 2013, notably raising the minimum marriage age to eighteen for both boys and girls, and the Sindh Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2013.

Regardless of strong legislative architecture, scholars and practitioners have noted persistent implementation gaps. Hyder et al. (2018) highlighted the failure of the Employment of Children Act 1991, to curtail the practice, citing inadequate labour inspection, judicial delay, lack of potential will. During the 2021 child rights activities and campaigns identified limited financial allocation to child protection agencies as a structural constraint on implementation capacity across all four provinces.

2.3 ¹²Social Work and Child Protection

³The relationship of Social Work and Child Protection is both fundamental and contested. The international federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014), defines Social Work as a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes social change, development, cohesion, and the empowerment of people ²⁰and communities, with principles of social justice, human rights, and collective responsibility as central to the profession. In Child protection context, social workers serve as caseworkers, therapeutic practitioners, policy advocates, and community mobilizers roles that span the range from prevention to intervention and aftercare (Doel & Shardlow, 2016).

⁴The profession of Social Work in Pakistan faces significant structural barriers to effective child protection practice. Siddiqui (2019) identifies the absence of a statutory social work council, the lack of mandatory licensing for practitioners, inadequate university-industry linkages, and the conflation of social work with NGO volunteerism as factors that weaken professional identity and reduce practitioner capacity. These structural deficits are compound in Sindh by a concentration of trained social work professionals in urban centers, leaving rural and peri-urban communities where child protection needs often most acute severely underserved.

2.4 Child Protection Challenges in Sindh: Evidence from the Literature

Pakistan's children report published by SPARC ⁶identifies Sindh having among the highest rates of child marriage in the country, with 24 percent of girls married before the age of eighteen despite the legislative prohibition (SPARC, 2022). Child labour affects an estimated 3.3 million

children in Sindh, primarily in agricultural, domestic service, and brick kilns (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Cruel Numbers 2023 documented over 2,000 reported cases of child abuse in a year (Sahil, 2023).

The literature also highlights the intersection of poverty, gender, and ethnicity in shaping child protection vulnerability. Girls face compounded risks from early marriage, gender-based violence, and educational exclusion, while children from minority communities and those living in remote rural districts particularly Tharparkar, Kashmore and Jacobabad face heightened exposure to exploitation with minimal institutional resource (HRCP. 2022). Displacement, including seasonal migration for agricultural labour and climate-induced displacement following the catastrophic 2022 floods, has further eroded the informal child protection networks in these communities.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the Human Rights-Based Approach to child protection (UNICEF, 2014).

3.1 Ecological System Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory conceives of child development and vulnerability as embedded within a set of nested, interacting social system: the microsystem (family, peers, school), the exosystem (community structures, local institutions), the macrosystem (cultural values, laws, economic system), and the chronosystem (temporal changes in environment). Applied to child protection, this framework directs analytical attention beyond the individual child to the multiple levels of the social environment that produce, sustain or mitigate vulnerability to harm. It provides a lens through which structural failures in Sindh's CPS can be understood as products of interacting deficiencies across ecological levels from family-level poverty and gender norms to macrosystem-level policy failures and cultural impunity for child abuse.

3.2 Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

The Human Rights-Based Approach frames child protection as a matter of enforceable rights rather than charitable provisions. Under this framework, children are right holders entitled to protection from the state as the primary duty-bearer, with accountability for rights fulfilment resting at institutional and governmental levels (UNICEF, 2014). The HRBA also emphasizes participation the right of children and affected communities to meaningfully engage in decisions affecting their safety and welfare. This framework provides normative grounding for the study's critique of Sindh's child protection system and its recommendations for reform.

Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist epistemological stance. Qualitative methodology is particularly well suited to the study's objectives, which emphasize contextual understanding, subjective meaning-making and the exploration of complex social phenomenon that resist quantification (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shah, Channa & Talpur, 2020). The interpretive paradigm acknowledges that knowledge about

child protection gaps and social work responses is socially constructed and embedded in specific institutional, cultural, and historical context a premise central to the analytical framework of this study (Charmaz, 2014).

Among qualitative traditions, this study draws primarily on a generic qualitative inquiry approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), augmented by elements of critical inquiry given the study's concern with structural power, institutional accountability, and rights-based practice. This design allows for flexible, interactive data collection and analysis while maintain theoretical coherence.

4.2 Study Setting

The study was conducted across two districts of Sindh: Karachi, and Hyderabad. These districts were selected using purposive sampling criterion to ensure representation of urban, and peri-urban context as well as variation in the geographic distribution and institutional maturity of child protection services. Karachi is the main urban center of the province while, Hyderabad is a mix of urban and peri-urban setting with the large number of child protection infrastructure.

4.3 Participants and Sampling

A total number of 18 participants were recruited through purposive sampling, non-probability sampling technique appropriate for qualitative research where the goal is theoretical representation rather than statistical generatability (Patton, 2015). Inclusion criteria required participants to have direct professional or experienced engagement with child protection services in Sindh, participants were drawn from five categories:

#	Participatory Category	Recruitment Method	Number
1	Government Child Protection Officers (SCPA)	Contact via local NGO's and SCPA Staff	4
2	Qualified Social Workers (NGO/CSO sector)	Snowball sampling via Social Work Alumni Networks	4
3	Social Work Academics & University Faculty	Direct personal contact of the author	4
4	Frontline NGO/CBO Program Staff	Referral by partnering organizations	4
5	Caregivers of Children Receiving CPS	Referral by Social Workers (with consent)	2
Total			18

Table 1: Participants Profile and Sampling Strategy

Out of 18 participants 10 were female and 08 were male, reflecting the gender distribution of frontline social welfare workers in Sindh. Institutional affiliations included the Sindh Child protection Authority, the department of Social Welfare and Women development, national and international NGOs, and two public universities in Sindh.

4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, an interview guide with open ended questions were developed and a pilot study was conducted on two social workers prior to

the main data collection. The guide was developed thematically with following thematic domains: perception of child protection gaps and challenges; institutional capacity and resource constraints; socio-cultural barriers to child protection; professional Social Work practice and responses; inter-agency coordination; and recommendation for reform.

Most of the interviews were conducted privately, face-to-face however, few interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing where in person access was not feasible. Interviewed lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, most of the interviews twelve (12) were conducted in URDU language which is the national language of Pakistan, however six (6) interviews were conducted in SINDHI which is official provincial language of Sindh. The interviews were transcribed and double checked by the participants by themselves to incorporate ‘member check’. After the member-check all interview transcripts were translated into English. The researcher himself translated all the interviews. During the data-collection and analysis stage, the researcher was engaged in “peer debriefing” sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure referential adequacy interviews were recorded, transcribed and stored, so that later on data analyses and interpretations stage they could be compared for adequacy and to provide the referential standard. The ‘Member check’ as more layer in the rigor of the study was added and participants were asked to verify the content of the transcripts and summaries of interpretations of their interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.5 Data Analysis

Following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), interview data was thematically analyzed following the prescribed sequence (1) familiarization with the data (2) generating initial codes (3) searching for themes (4) reviewing themes (5) defining and naming themes, and finally (6) producing the report.

An inductive approach to coding was adopted during initial phase, allowing themes to emerge originally from the data rather than being imposed by the pre-existing theoretical categories. In subsequent analytic phase, a more deductive orientation was applied to interpret emerging themes in relation to the study’s theoretical frameworks. To keep the analytical rigor, the research employed member checking by sharing preliminary theme summaries with six participants for verification as well as peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and thick description in reporting of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The initial letter of invitation that was sent to the participants contained an assurance that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and if they did, their records of interviews and their personal information will be securely destroyed accordingly. The Participation in the study was entirely on voluntary basis and the participants were well informed about it and there was no pressure in any way to them to participate in the interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and each informant were sent a copy of transcript data. The participants were also asked to incorporate any corrections if needed. In order to preserve confidentiality, the identity of the participants was obscured and the participants were assured about it. Each individual identity was designated with a pseudonym to be used in analysis and findings.

Categories	Pseudonym
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Qualified Social Workers	QSW
Government Child Protection Officers	CPO
Social Work Academics & University Faculty	SWA
Frontline NGO/CBO Program Staff	PS
Caregivers of Children Receiving CPS	CG

Table 2 Description of Pseudonyms

Findings

Four major themes were emerged through thematic analysis with each comprising multiple sub-themes. The themes are presented below with illustrative direct participants quotes to ground the analysis in the voices of practitioners and stakeholders.

Theme 1: Legislative and Policy Gaps

1.1 Non-implementation of the Sindh Child Protection Authority Act 2011

Across all participant categories, the non-implementation of the SCPA Act was identified as the most fundamental systemic failure in Sindh's child protection architecture. While the Act mandates the establishment of the district level child protection units in all districts of Sindh, participant reported that fewer than half of the units were functional at the time of data collection. A senior government child protection officer in one of the districts articulated the institutional coordination this represents:

"We have the law on the paper that says every district should have a child protection unit with trained officers, a case management system, shelter facilities. We have one officer one for a district of over two million people. The Act might as well be written on water" (CPO-2)

Participant also drew attention to critical definitional and procedural gaps in the Act itself notably the absence of mandatory reporting requirements for professionals encountering suspected child abuse, the lack of statutory child protection registers, and inadequate provisions for interim care orders in emergency situations.

1.2 Fragmented Legislative Framework

Social Work Academics and NGO practitioners highlighted the fragmented nature of the legislative framework governing child protection in Sindh, with responsibilities and powers distributed across multiple Acts the SPCA Act, the Sindh Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, the Juvenile Justice System Act 2018, and the Domestic Violence Act without an overarching coordinating statute or inter-agency protocol. This fragmentation generates jurisdictional confusion among implementing agencies.

"When a child comes to us who has been married off at age twelve and is also working in a brick kiln, which law applies? Which agency takes the case? The

police say it is the SCPA, the SCPA says it is the labour department, the labour department says it is the family court's matter. The child falls through every crack"
(QSW-1)

Theme 2: Institutional and Human Resource Deficiencies

2.1 Active Shortage of Trained Child Protection Workers

The most consistently cited operational challenge across all participant groups was the severe shortage of trained child protection professionals within government institutions. Participants in both districts reported ratios of child protection that they described as 'absurd', 'impossible', and 'a national embarrassment' NGO practitioners noted that many government-employed child protection officers lacked formal social work qualifications, having been appointed from general administrative cadres rather than from social work professional backgrounds;

"I have a colleague in the SPCA office she is former revenue officer. Though she is a good person. But she has never done a child protection assessment in her life. She doesn't know what trauma-informed practice means. This is what is happening in our system and institution. System has too many flaws, from incompetency, incapacity, corruption and irrelevant qualification. Most of the officers and staff do not have the proper qualification required, no matter how many trainings or capacity-building opportunities are provided to them, they still lack the basic skills needed to adopt and apply them in their respective fields" (QSW-2)

2.2 Inadequate Financial Resources and Infrastructure

Participants consistently identified chronic under-funding as a root cause of institutional incapacity. Budget allocations to child protection at the provincial level were described as a fraction of what is required to operationalize the SPCA Act, shelter homes for abused and trafficked children were reported to be operating beyond capacity, understaffed, and lacking basic therapeutic services. Districts officers described the absence of functional vehicles, office equipment, and communication infrastructure as barriers to even basic casework:

"Our shelter homes most of the time runs out of capacity. We regularly have more children than the beds. There is an acute shortage of psychologist in the SCPA. When traumatized are admitted to our shelter we are unable to provide them even their basic minimum needs" (CPO-1)

2.3 Absence of Inter-Agency Coordination

A frequent finding across all participants groups was the lack of systematic inter-agency coordination among the multiple bodies with child protection mandates the SPCA, police, health departments, education authorities, the department of Social Welfare, and the courts. Participants described referral systems as informal, inconsistent, and dependent on personal relationship rather than institutional protocols. Caregivers of children receiving services reported particular frustration with the experience of navigating multiple agencies:

"I took my daughter to the police. They sent me to the SPCA. The SCPA said I needed a medical report first. I went to the hospital. The doctor said I needed a

police report first. I went around for three weeks like this. My daughter was in the same danger the whole time" (CG-1)

Theme 3: Socio-Cultural Barriers to Child Protection

3.1 Normalization of Child Labour and Child Marriage

Participants across all participant categories identified the normalization of child labour and child marriage in large sections of Sindh society as a pervasive barrier to child protection. Economic rationalization for child labour were reported to be deeply embedded, particularly in agricultural communities and among families displaced by the 2022 floods. Social work practitioners described encounters with families who actively resisted intervention:

"The father comes to us and says: you are asking my ten-year old not work but without his income we don't eat. This is real. This is not ignorance. This is poverty. If we want to protect children from labour, we have to address the economic desperation that produces it. Our approach has to be livelihood support alongside child rights awareness you cannot separate them" (PS-2)

Child marriage, despite its prohibition under the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013, was reported to remain widely practiced, particularly in rural districts. Social Work faculty participants noted that community leaders, religious authorities, local politicians and elders of the community, frequently reinforced child marriage practices by invoking cultural and religious justifications, creating an authority structure that formal child protection actors are ill-equipped to contest without community engagements strategies:

"Despite having the SCMR Act 2013 unfortunately, nothing in practice on ground, situation is very grim. There are numerous barriers including community leaders, influential persons, politicians, religious and minority leaders" (SWA-4)

3.2 Stigma, Silence, and the Under-Reporting of Child Abuse

Participants consistently reported that child sexual abuse, in particular, is systematically under-reported in Sindh due to a confluence of cultural stigma, fear for secondary victimization by authorities, threats from perpetrators, and a lack of confidence in institutional responsiveness. Social workers described the profound impact of this silence on their capacity to intervene:

"Families will rather keep the abuse secret than bring 'shame' on the family by reporting it. And sometimes they are right to distrust the system we have cases where the police questioned a child survivor in front of the alleged perpetrator. The system re-traumatizes children who are brave enough to come forward" (QSW-3)

Theme 4: Social Work Responses Capacities, Constraints, and Innovations

4.1 NGO Led Child Protection Practice

NGO and civil society organizations emerged from the data as the primary service delivery infrastructure for child protection in Sindh compensating substantially for the gaps in state provision. Participants from NGO backgrounds described a range of child protection intervention including community awareness campaigns, child friendly spaces, survivor support groups, legal aid and court accomplishment, and referral services, international organization including UNICEF,

save the children, and ROZAN were cited as key technical and financial supports for local NGO capacity.

Despite their contributions, NGO led child protection practice was described as fragmented, geographically concentrated in urban centers, and dependent on volatile donor funding, participants expressed concern about the sustainability and scalability of NGO interventions given their dependence on external financing:

“When the donor funding ends, the program ends. We worked in a community for three years in Kashmore on awareness, referrals, and case management. Then the project was closed. Two years later I visited nothing remains, the government has not picked it up. We are building sand castles.” (QSW-4)

4.2 Innovations ³¹ in Social Work Practice

In the context of Sindh participants have described several promising innovative practice approaches. Community based child protection committees established in partnership with local leaders and trained by NGOs were cited as an effective mechanism for extending child protection surveillance and referrals to remote communities where institutional actors cannot reach. Mobile social work teams operating in displacement related child vulnerability. School based Social Work programmes piloted in Karachi were cited as an entry point for early identification of at-risk children.

4.3 ¹⁹ Professional Social Work; Barriers and Aspirations

Social Work Academics and NGO practitioners expressed strong aspirations for a more professionalized, institutionally recognized Social Work sector in Sindh, while acknowledging significant structural barriers. The absence of Social Work council or accreditation council in Pakistan, mandatory licensing, and structured continuing professional development frameworks were cited as barriers to professional identity and quality assurance. There was near universal consensus among professional participants that the recognition and deployment of qualified Social Workers within government child protection institutions rather than non-specialist administration staff is an essential prerequisite for system transformation.

“Every country that takes child protection seriously has professional social workers at the center of its system. Britain, Australia, South Africa social workers do child protection. Here it is an afterthought. We need a law that says: if you are working in child protection in the government sector, you must have a social work qualification. That one change would transform the system” (SWA-2)

Discussion

The findings of the study present a coherent and deeply concerning portrait of child protection in Sindh: a system characterized by legislative aspiration untranslated into institutional reality, professional human resources too thin and under-trained to meet the scale of need, socio cultural norms that actively reproduce child vulnerability, and a Social Work profession struggling to assert its professional identity and practice relevance against structural odds. These findings resonate strongly with comparable literature from other Global South Context including Bangladesh, India, and Nigeria (Islam & Hossain, 2021; Mishra & Srivastava, 2021;

Oghenekohwo, 2020). When child protection systems exhibit same patterns, legislative progression combined with operational fragility.

The ecological system lens applied in the study illuminates how child protection failures in Sindh operate across multiple systemic levels simultaneously. At the macrosystem level, cultural norms normalizing child labour and child marriage, combined with policy environment that treats child protection as a residual welfare function rather than a core governance responsibility, create the structural conditions for child vulnerability. At the exosystem level, institutional incapacity in the SCPA, fragmented inter-agency protocols, and the urban concentration of Social Work professionals remove the protective function that formal institutions are theoretically constituted to provide. At the microsystem level, family economic stress, gender-based power inequalities, and the corrosive effects of poverty on parental protective capacity further compound vulnerability.

The HRBA framework foregrounds accountability as a central analytical category. The findings that SCPA Act the province's primary child protection statute remains largely unimplemented more than a decade after its passage is a profound accountability failure. From an HRBA perspective, this represents not merely an administrative shortcoming but an obligation under the CRC. The systemic insufficient resources of child protection institutions signal a political choice one that places fiscal conservatism and competing bureaucratic priorities above children's constitutionally guaranteed rights.

³² The role of social work in this context presents a paradox: at once indispensable to functional child protection practice and structurally marginalized within the very institution that child protection requires. The aspiration articulated by Social Work participants for a statutorily recognized, licensed, and professionally regulated Social work sector embedded within government child protection structures align with the evidence base from comparative child welfare systems and represents a critical pathway to system transformation in Sindh (Doel & Shardlow, 2016; Gray & Webb, 2013).

The innovative practice examples identified in the finding's community-based child protection committees, mobile social work teams, school-based identification programmes demonstrate that effective child protection responses are not beyond Sindh's organizational capacity. What is required is the political will, financial investment, and professional infrastructure to scale these innovations from isolated pilot projects into system wide practice.

Recommendations

The study offers following broad actionable recommendations for policy makers, social workers, practitioners, civil society, and international development partners:

For Government of Sindh:

- Full operationalization of ¹⁵ Sindh Child Protection Authority Act 2011; and establish functional child protection units in all districts with adequate professional staff, case management infrastructure and shelter facilities.
- SCPA Act needs to be amended to incorporate mandatory reporting obligations for professionals working for children, a statutory child protection register, and emergency protection order provisions.

- A minimum of 05% of provincial GDP should be directed towards child protection services.
- Develop an integrated inter-agency child protection protocols clearly defining referrals pathways, case coordination responsibilities, and escalation procedures across all agencies mandated with child protection.
- Establish minimum qualification requirements including formal Social Work credentials for all government employed child protection officers.

For ³⁸ Social Work Profession and Academia

- ³⁸ Social Workers urgently needs the establishment of Social Work council to provide statutory professional regulations, mandatory licensing, and professional development frameworks.
- Curricula of Social Work programs should be aligned with international standards on child protection, including trauma informed practice, and family systems assessment.
- Establishment of University-SCPA partnership to provide field placements for social work students within government child protection institutions, to build and strengthen mutual capacity and professional relationship.

For Civil Society and NGOs and International Development Partners

- Civil society should invest in sustainability and institutionalization of community-based child protection committees, seeking government coownership and budget contribution rather than sole donor dependence.
- International development partners should invest in social work professional development programmes, including ¹² scholarships, training exchanges, and technical assistance for curriculum reform in Social Work programs at universities in Sindh.

Conclusion

⁴ The study set out to examine the gaps, challenges, and Social Work responses in child protection services in Sindh, Pakistan. Drawing on qualitative data from 18 practitioners, officials, academics, and caregivers across two districts, it has generated a richly textured account of a child protection system under profound stress. Legislative frameworks exist but go unimplemented, institutional mandates are assigned but unfunded. Professional practitioners are trained but undeployed in the institutions that need them most. Communities bear the weight of socio-cultural norms that reproduce child vulnerability generation by generation.

And the study also documents resilience, innovation, and commitment. Social workers and NGO practitioners working within these constraints are finding creative pathways community committees, mobile teams, school based programmes that demonstrate the possibility of effective child protection even within resource constrained environments. Their voices, so rarely centered in policy debates, carry a clear message: what is needed is not more legislation, but the institutional will, professional investment, and financial resources to implement what is already on paper.

The children of Sindh deserve a protection system worthy of the name one grounded in their rights, responsive to their needs, and staffed by professionals equipped to serve them with skill and dignity. The study offers ³⁴ an evidence-based foundation for the policy and practice reforms that would bring such a closer to reality.

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