

The Kids Are Not Alright



There exist at least 400 videos of drugged and weeping children who, if able to talk, are begging not to be touched. 280 children have a story, which can't be deleted from their minds as easily as it can from a camera. For 7 years, 25 men have been profiting from selling childhoods for as little as Rs. 50.

It was easy to dub these numbers an exaggeration, as Kasur District police chief Rai Baber Saeed did. It was an old case. Parents' showing video evidence of their children

being violated was a clever tactic to tip the scales in a land dispute. The pesky media folks were as usual, embellishing the facts for ratings.

Provincial minister Rana Sanaullah was happy to corroborate this, even going so far as to say, "no instance of child sex abuse had been reported." Indeed, that may very well have been the case. It must have been difficult to lodge an FIR if police told mothers that their complaints did not interest them, to bring them something new.

Like the name of the languid Punjabi town denotes, there is uncertainty about whose fault this is. Does rigid segregation make a child somehow easier to justify as a sexual partner than another consenting adult? Do we blame the filmmakers for creating the market for child pornography or the pedophilic consumers who propped up their commercial venture? Where was the police? The town's government representative, N-League's, Malik Ahmed Saeed? Why isn't the PPP's Ahmad Ali Tolu being called out given that the bulk of the abuse took place during his tenure? Too much Islam? Too little?

Cases of child abuse are not new to Pakistan's people, polity or police. The very same story from Kasur was reported as early as 2012. Three more cases of child abuse have surfaced in other Punjabi cities just today. Debuting in September last year, the film "Pakistan's Hidden Shame" documented how extremely vulnerable Peshawar's street children are to sexual violence.

Optimistically, the documentary concluded that Tehrik-i-Insaf chief Imran Khan would champion the cause of preventing child abuse in his province. Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif has ordered inquiries into the matter. The Sindh Assembly has passed a resolution condemning the incident. Promises are easy to make in the land of the pure. Policies that stifle the growth of sexual abuse? Not so much. Not here, not anywhere in the world.

Abusers have a way of making their victims feel like what is happening to them is somehow their responsibility. As if it was their fault to assume that an open field was to play sport, not to be raped. As if the lack of strength in their juvenile bodies was somehow to blame for not being able to fight off grown men. As if they should expect to be sodomized at the age of 10. These 25 men went a step further, making children pay them for their silence with monthly retainers and guilt.

This business would not have been such a lucrative venture in a world where victim shaming did not exist. The children of Kasur would have indubitably known that being raped was not their fault. They would be aware that if their parents saw these videos, their disgust would be reserved for the man behind the lens, not them. Perhaps these children would have realized that the 'protection' they were buying with stolen family jewels and hard-earned money was really extortion. Blackmail is an ineffective strategy when the party being taken advantage of has nothing to hide.

And to be fair, many of the abused children did go to their parents, who in turn went to the police with the videos. Most were met with disdain, others confronted, and some even told that their underage children were happy to participate in intercourse. This should not have happened. The Kasur police should not have needed a video to start investigating, and despite being lucky enough to have proof could not stop 25 degenerates with a camera.

The moment the very first parent walked into the police station was the time to take action. Not 280 children later.

If there's anything that the Kasur episode has done, it's underscoring the need for reform on every level when dealing with child abuse. In "Pakistan's Hidden Shame", a disgruntled policeman tells the video makers that their force is already spread too thin, that as long as the country remains plagued with terrorism child abuse will remain a low priority. There is truth here (even if it does not offer much by way of justifying their behavior) and the government must confront it. Assemble a task force in every district dedicated to handle sexual violence. Provide sensitivity training, counselors and give them the funds they need. Remind them that they serve to protect citizens, not criminals.

Because in a world where the population of rapists and pedophiles will never abate, the least we can do is be by our children's side.

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