

DRF Statement: Rise in Cases Involving Minors Flags Urgent Online Safety Crisis

A recent [UNICEF report](#) estimates that around 20 million internet-using children aged 12 to 17 across 21 countries experienced at least one form of sexual abuse or exploitation through digital technologies in a single year. Less than one percent of cases are reported to the police, a social worker or a helpline, while more than four in ten cases are not being disclosed to anyone at all.

Pakistan is part of this global picture, and the country's own data shows why the issue demands immediate attention. Among the complaints received by the Digital Rights Foundation's Digital Security Helpline are cases involving children as young as six and nine. The fact that children so young are being exposed to this harm should concern all of us.

The scale of the problem continues to grow. In [2024](#), the Helpline received 124 complaints involving minors, a 51 percent increase from the previous year. In [2025](#), the number rose to 159, a 28 percent increase. As of July 2026, the Helpline has already received 153 complaints involving minors.

Across the cases reported to the Helpline and reflected in the UNICEF findings, common forms of online exploitation include grooming, unwanted sexual content, pressure to engage in sexual conversations or share images, the non-consensual sharing of sexual images, blackmail and the continued circulation of abusive material. The increase in complaints does not represent the full extent of the problem. Many children remain silent because they fear being blamed or punished. Some worry that their phones will be taken away or that speaking out will affect their education, relationships or safety at home. Others may not recognise that they have been abused.

UNICEF found that children who experienced technology-enabled sexual abuse were four times more likely to report suicidal thoughts, suicidal behaviour and self-harm. In Pakistan, the risk of self-harm was more than seven times higher among children who experienced such abuse.

More must now be done by every institution responsible for children's wellbeing. Platforms have the capability to make online spaces safer. They control how these spaces are designed, how abuse is detected, and how safety measures are applied, yet these measures remain a voluntary promise rather than a legal requirement. Closing this gap requires effective regulation, backed by



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regulators equipped to understand platform design and hold companies accountable for detecting and addressing abuse.

States, meanwhile, have the responsibility to protect children and uphold their rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This responsibility must begin with fixing the referral pathway, which remains fragmented across provinces, leaving many children unsure of whom to tell. Helplines and school counsellors need proper funding and availability in Urdu and regional languages, since children are more likely to confide in people they trust than approach institutions that feel distant or intimidating. Schools and families must also be equipped to teach children about consent, boundaries, and respectful behaviour. These conversations are difficult, but necessary, particularly given that more than a quarter of reported cases involve another child. The rise from 124 to 159 cases in one year is a clear warning. Children cannot be expected to prevent abuse, report it and protect themselves from its consequences alone. Every child deserves to use the internet without fear.

The Digital Rights Foundation's Digital Security Helpline is available through its toll-free number 0800-39393, DRF's social media platforms and email at helpdesk@digitalrightsfoundation.pk. The Helpline operates Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

Digital Rights Foundation

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