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Power, Piety, and Silence: A Qualitative Exploration of the Social and Cultural Drivers of Child Sexual Abuse in Pakistan's Religious Institutions

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Abstract

This study examines child sex abuse (CSA) in religious institutions across Pakistan. It describes the socio-cultural factors that influence this abuse and either prevent or encourage abuse victims to disclose it. I used qualitative research methods and phrases to understand the phenomenon, and the direct or indirect experiences of participants. Purposive sampling was used to include participants from the accused, victim's family, medical doctors and psychologists, the police, and teachers and administrators of Madaris. Data for this research was collected by conducting 35 interviews and 8 focus group discussions. The outcome of this research was a thematic analysis. The results show that the most influential theme was Stigma and silence. This was evident in victim blaming, family honor, the spin of social disapproval, the taboo of cultural silence. The second most influential theme was gender and sexual norms. This theme included the repression of sexuality, gender segregation, and sexual repression and taboos. The third most influential theme was the culture of power distance and authority. It observed respect towards religious authority, faith, and the obedience of elders as well as the absence of the ability to question. The final theme was child socialization. This theme included suppression and self-control, as well as a lack of freedom. The results of this research show that child sex abuse is the influence of integrated socio-cultural systems and religious institutions. These results will inform the development of more culturally relevant policies on reporting abuse, improved internal accountability, enhanced awareness, and confidential means for reporting.

Keywords: *Child Sexual Abuse; Religious Institutions; Socio-Cultural Determinants; Religious Education; Stigma and Silence; Power Distance; Gender Norms; Pakistan.*

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a social, cultural, and institutional challenge for child-protection in Pakistan because children may be sexually abused by adults in their care during their religious, educational and moral upbringing (Shah et al., 2025). The prevalence of child abuse in Pakistan is growing, with Sahil recording 3,364 cases of child abuse in 2024, including 1,828 child sexual abuse cases (Javed, 2025). The reported data shows that approximately 9 children were abused every day in 2024, and children age 11 to 15 years were particularly vulnerable (Owusu-Addo et al., 2023). The phenomenon is

not exclusive to girls, as boys represented 47% of the child abuse victims reported in 2024, showing that CSA is an issue for both genders of children (Mansoor & Saher, 2024). Earlier data shows that the issue was ongoing as Sahil recorded 2,021 cases of child sexual abuse in 2023 out of the 4,213 cases of child abuse reported in that year (Javed, 2025). Considering that child sexual abuse statistics for the year 2023 and 2024 were recorded, the reporting of child sexual abuse as stated is expected to be less than the actual figures. It is indicated that public stigma, fear, family pressure and cultural beliefs are the main reasons for the concealment and underreporting of child sexual abuse (Perera & Sewwandi, 2023). In this regard, religious institutions, including madrasas and other faith-based educational institutions, are particularly relevant, as children may spend significant time under the care of religious teachers, creating an institution where trust, power, obedience and faith may be especially dangerous to children (AlMatrooshi et al., 2021).

This research focuses on CSA in Pakistani religious communities. Pakistani religious communities include powerful institutions where many members of the community view religious teachers as authority figures. Because of this, religious teachers enjoy a great deal of community power and members of that community, including children, are often unwilling to confront them. Research on Pakistan has found that cultural barriers to reporting CSA, including the community's perception of family honor and reputation, often discourage victims from reporting (Jud et al. 2020). These barriers are likely more complex in religious communities due to the community's trust and the perceptions of authority and of religious sanctity. Parents and children are unwilling to challenge inappropriate behavior and are unwilling to advocate for external support (Fatima et al. 2021). It is clear that the problem is not just individual CSA and perpetrators, but also families, communities, gender, power dynamics, social and cultural norms, social silence, and stigma, and the safety support systems of institutions (Bilgrami and Nasreen, 2023). Pakistani research, in particular, found that cultural and social norms were contributing factors to CSA and that social and cultural elements should be incorporated into the development of prevention frameworks (Ahmed, and Yasmin, 2025). The lack of research on these broad cultural and social elements means that we do not understand how these social and cultural elements impact religious institutions and how they shape silence and refusal to report. This unresolved problem emphasizes the need to explore this phenomenon through the accounts and insights of the pertinent stakeholders rather than considering CSA as a strictly legal or statistical dilemma.

This problem indicates the need to approach the issue outside the confines of law and statistics. The first and foremost approach should be to understand the experience and perceptions of the stakeholders and to appreciate their perspectives. An analysis of existing literature reveals an important gap in studying CSA in Pakistan. Much of the previous work has relied on statistics around the prevalence of CSA, case studies, analysis and reporting of cases in the media, legal analysis, and the quantification of institutional and social cultural factors (Duman et al., 2021). For instance, Sahil's Cruel Numbers reports provide systematic evidence at the national level by reporting cases of child sexual abuse (Gröber et al., 2024). Likewise, more recent quantitative studies have employed survey and statistical methodologies to analyze culture, society, and the phenomenon of CSA (Zeighami et al., 2023). Other studies have informed the culture of reporting, legal proceedings, counseling, and the role of the state, and have touched upon the role of stigmatizing social values, weaknesses of the systems and services (Bilal et al., 2022). A gap in the new literature has been addressing issues in seminaries through structural inequities such as weak systems and poor oversight (Widanaralalage et al., 2025). These

studies also do not thoroughly document the lived experiences, interpretations, meanings, and social processes through which religious cultural and social determinants influence CSA. There is still a large area of qualitative study that needs to be conducted, especially regarding authority and obedience, social stigma, family honor, community silence, trust in religious personnel, gender norms and instrumental as well as structural factors that facilitate the victim blaming of girls and women, fear of social fears, the maintenance of institutional loyalty, as well as the mechanisms that inhibit individuals from coming forward to denounce and expose crimes (Shah et al., 2020). It is on this basis that this study attempts to contribute the much-needed qualitative data to these gaps by addressing how stakeholders perceive and internalize the social and cultural determinants of CSA in religious organizations in Pakistan.

The focus of this research is to explore the social and cultural factors that shape the vulnerability, disclosure, institutional response, and prevention of CSA in Pakistan (Suleman et al., 2025). This study has the potential to provide new theories by discussing how the social norms and cultural expectations of community members, together with the authority and power of institutions, vary and contribute to the occurrence and reporting of CSA in religious spaces (Kamal, 2022). Additionally, this research may provide new empirical data by collecting information from stakeholders and providing a different perspective that may not be present in salient newspapers and statistics (Rafiq et al., 2025). This study may provide a framework for policy-makers to create adaptable child protection policies for religious spaces that ensure the safety of children, even at the cost of potentially harming the reputation of religious institutions (Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2025). Additionally, this study may provide a means to understand the gaps within religious institutions, focusing specifically on the lack of safeguarding policies, reporting, and the greater need for accountability and protection activities (Bhatia et al., 2024). Finally, this study may improve the public's understanding of the social values and cultural norms that maintain children's silence against abuse (Swathisha & Deb, 2022). Specifically, this study will provide much needed insight into best practices and solutions regarding prevention, reporting, and the protection of children for the benefit of parents and communities in Pakistan (Ali & Rogers, 2023).

2. Literature Review

Socio-cultural frameworks define the circumstances in which pedophilia can emerge and be concealed in religious educational institutions such as madrassas in Pakistan. One of these frameworks is the presence of a high-power distance in many South Asian countries, consisting of rigid social orders and a scarcity of social critiques of and challenges to authority. In madrassas, religious teachers are deemed to be moral and spiritual teachers. Therefore, in many cases, religious teachers are the absolute decision-makers in the distinction between good and evil, and as a consequence, are beyond social critiques and restraints. Madrassa students are likely to perceive some abuses as an infringement on religious authority and therefore sacrilegious. Consequently, they may be likely to ignore or overlook abuse. Highly deferential social norms and a teacher-centered classroom further reinforce this imbalance. Students are socialized to remain silent and accept all instructions without question. The socio-cultural respect for elders may serve to discourage children from recognizing abuse, thus increasing their susceptibility to abuse. (Muazzam et al., 2024; Kamran & Burns, 2025). There are also worries about gender and sexuality in Pakistan's conservative culture in addition to how they combine sexuality with authority and suppression Brindha et al., 2023). Pakistan still has a lot of sexual repression. Sexual

matters are discussed, but repressive moral codes are imposed, and enforced, creating very unhealthy attitudes toward sexuality (Abbas et al., 2025). Gender segregated madrassas in Pakistan have no inter-sex interactions and leave people no chance to develop healthy and appropriate relationships (Sharma & Cheruvalath, 2025). Pakistani sexuality takes a conservative approach, and because of the culture and the taboo of talking about sex, people are left to believe and develop negative attitudes about sexuality without any formal sexual education. People have no way to learn how to identify or define sexual boundaries and what is and isn't appropriate. They take all of their sexual frustration and channel that toward healthy outlets (Sharma & Cheruvalath, 2025).

The socio-cultural stigma of sexual abuse is a primary factor that allows sexual abuse to perpetuate. In most cases, the apathy shown in addressing abuse present in Pakistani society is due to the inability of many to manage their shame when faced with the burden of dealing with sexual issues (Uy et al., 2025). This apathy is often evident in the disregard of abuse complaints and is sometimes evident in victim blaming. In some of these cases, abused children are accused of having provoked the abuse and in some cases, having brought shame to the family. Izzat (family honor) continues to be dominant in these examples, as families continue to remain silent onstruct of criminal justice to uphold their social status at the expense of the victim. The loss of family honor perpetuates social stigma as abuse survivors remain silent, being made to believe that their chances of being married off by their family will diminish (Behzadi Fard et al., 2025). Madrassas reinforce a culture of silence as a result of both their own internal structures and systems and their collective norms. As small, religious, community-based systems, their members don't allow for, and in fact are distrustful, of external involvement and thus would rather deal with issues on their own. This would discourage a victim and their family from seeking legal and/or social recourse, when the perpetrator is a religious figure. Notably, some victims stay silent for many years after abuse has occurred on the grounds of a madrassa without a means to report it or child protective systems in place. The combination of the socially-present stigma to report along with the institution's tactical culture is aimed at the lack of recourse in order to intervene and manage the access of younger students to abusive situations (Asad & Asif, 2025).

Different child socialization practices in Pakistan pose an additional risk for minor students in Pakistani religious educational institutions. Corporal punishment in schools can create confusion for minors in differentiating abusive behavior and the use of governing authority (Kolisetty, 2022). If corporal punishment is socially permitted, then minors would allow themselves to be subjected to or ignore inappropriate behavior. Additionally, many children learn to stifle their emotions and refrain from verbalizing discomfort and defiance, especially toward Authority figures. This emotional stifling can render children unable to verbalize their experiences of abuse and increase the likelihood that they will be victims (Amedu et al., 2025). Children's socialization includes their ability to understand the importance of social order and their willingness to submit and accept social control. Evidence of socialization can be seen in traditional educational methods used in madrasahs and other organizations/formal associations that follow the same education principles (Peguero & Hong, 2020). For the children these educational methods apply to, the order of the system is designed to be followed to a T and is devoid of (and discourages) any form of individual decision making. For such children, a compliance-based system of social control and order becomes a way of life. Their socialization fails to meet their emotional and psychological needs, and therefore leaves these children more vulnerable to the system and the adults to which they are exposed to. The violation of the

social norms inherent to these institutions provide abusive adults with a pass to breach the social order and to restrict other adults from being able to intervene. Further, the socialization system prohibits children from having the capacity to address and challenge the abusive situations.

Many of traditional social practices contribute to the ability to conceal social violations. These elements include high status and esteemed social spaces combined with rigid sexual norms. In these environments, violations can occur. Social stigma and silence combined with socialization strategies create an environment which inhibits children from resisting and/or reporting social violations. These elements do not act in isolation and strengthen the social system. It also becomes a complex, interlaced social system that resists social intervention. Recognizing this system provides the possibility to construct socially progressive interventions that reconcile the entire system (Ali et al., 2023). Social and cultural factors are important in the study of pedophilia and its association with Pakistani madrassas. Various factors such as: authoritarianism, strict gender roles, pervasive stigma, and traditional methods of child-rearing create an environment of abuse and concealment of abuse. They provide no accountability for the abuse. (Begum & Gill, 2023). The abuse environment will remain broken and the balance of power retained if the root of the issue is not addressed. Solutions to these problems include community outreach, legal changes, and added child advocacy and protective services. These efforts will be successful in achieving the goal of making religious education systems free of abuse. (Gnaim-Mwassi et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Sample and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative, phenomenological research framework to analyze the members of or people impacted by child sexual abuse in religious institutions in Pakistan. In order to define their perspectives on child sexual abuse occurring in religious institutions, it is pertinent to consider the subjective meanings one assigns to experiences and phenomena. A purposive sampling method was adopted to include people with first-hand knowledge or professionals related to child sexual abuse in a religious institutional environment. The participants were selected from the categories of accused, the family of victims, medical practitioners, police officers (investigation unit), and teachers/managers of Madaris. Even though the estimate of this population was around 20,000, the actual number was 35 interviews, of which 6 were accused, 8 were victims' families, 5 were medical professionals, 6 were police, and 10 were managers of Madaris. Along with this, 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also organized. Considering the relevance, accessibility, participation, and appearance of consistent information with adequate depth, sample adequacy was determined (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Questions for interviews and focus groups were open-ended to enable participants to narrate how they understood and perceived issues around child sexual abuse. The interviewed persons included some of the accused persons to understand how they perceived the issues, as well as family members of victims to understand what they knew of the circumstances of the abuse. Participants from the medical and psychological professions put forward their professional perspectives of the psychological aspects of the child sexual abuse, the police put forward their professional perspectives of the issues they faced, and the educators from Madaris brought out professional perspectives of the

institutional concerns of supervision, and jurisdiction, and the protection of children. Focus group discussions were used to bring out collective alignment and misalignment of the experiences and interpretations of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Thus, due to the nature of the topic, strict ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was upheld. Personal identifiers were removed by using participant codes or pseudonyms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews and focus group discussions took place in private settings. Reflexive notes were maintained to identify and minimize researcher bias in phenomena description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study employed 35 in-depth interviews and eight Focus Group Discussions (FGD) as the major methods of primary data collection. This mixture of methods enabled the researcher to gather diverse views and consider child sexual abuse as a multidimensional problem of the psychological, social, institutional, and relational order. Triangulation of methods portrayed a wealth of approaches that improved the quality of qualitative data. The Ricoeurian approach made it possible to move beyond the quantification of the occurrence of child sexual abuse in various religious institutions and capture the views of those close to and professionally involved with the victims of child sexual abuse regarding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table-1: Proposed and Actual Sample for Interview and FGDs

Sr. #	Categories of Participants	Estimated Population	Proposed Sample Size Interviews	Actual Sample Size Interviews	Proposed Sample Size of FGDs	Actual Sample Size of (FGDs)
1	Accused Individuals	200	8–12	06	1–2	2
2	Family Members of Victims	800	12–18	08	2–3	1
3	Medical Doctors & Psychologists	120	6–10	5	1–2	1
4	Police Officers (Investigation Units)	280	8–12	6	1–2	2
5	Teachers/Administrators of Madaris	18,600	18–25	10	3–4	2
TOTAL		20,000	52–77	35	8-13	08

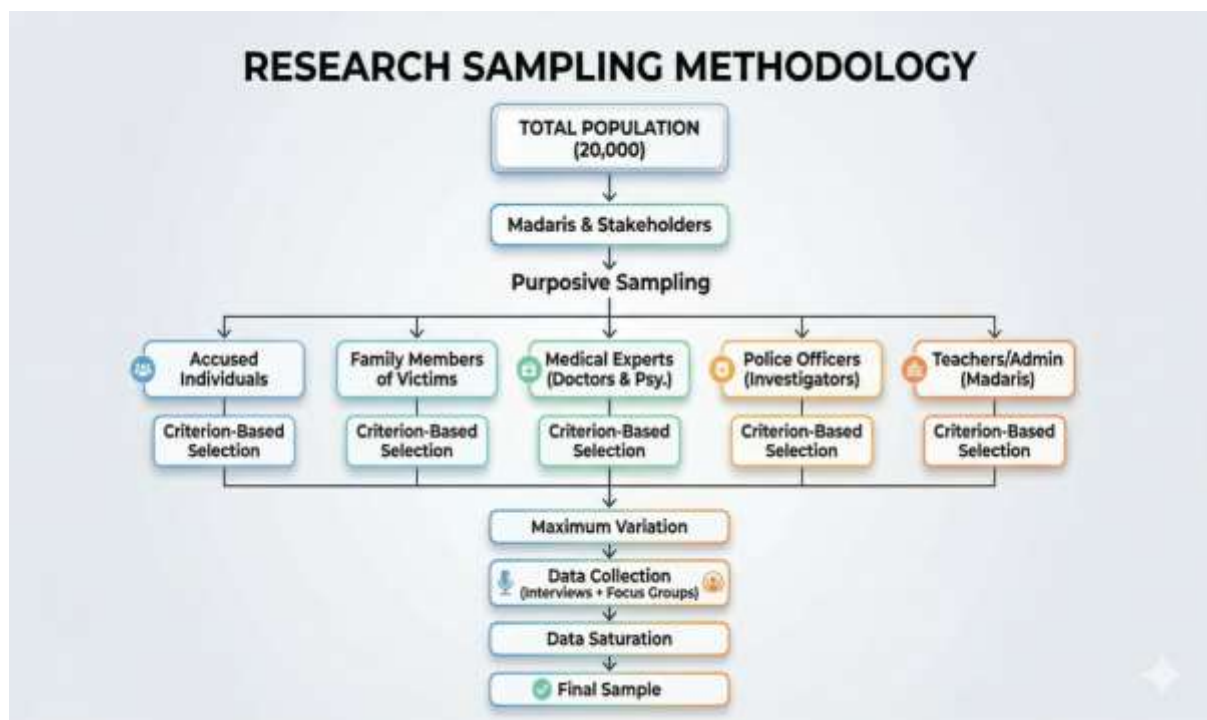


Figure-1: Research Sampling & Methodology**3.2. Data Analysis.**

This study, as per Braun and Clarke (2006), utilizes thematic analysis as the primary qualitative data analysis approach to systematically analyze data generated from both interviews and focus group discussions. The use of thematic analysis in qualitative research is extensive due to its flexibility and the ability to understand the participants' experiences in greater depth (Masoom Ali et al., 2020). The analysis of child sexual abuse in religious institutions is complex and delicate, for which thematic analysis was believed to be the best approach to understand the different standpoints of the accused, the victims' family members, doctors and psychologists, police, and either Madaris teachers or administrators (Waqas et al., 2020). The goal of the analysis is to identify and describe important themes within the different stories and accounts of the participants, while also recognizing and allowing for the differences in the lived experiences and standpoints of the participants, thereby providing a complete account of the phenomenon (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020).

The analytical process adopted the six-phase Braun and Clarke (2006) method of familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and naming and refining themes. The final phase is the report presentation. Nevertheless, this process was not strictly sequential, as the researcher was able to shift between the six phases. This was especially useful for ensuring that the findings of the study remained closely associated with the informants' accounts (Lim et al., 2022). Great attention was given to each transcript to uncover both the reported statements and the hidden messages relevant to the research problem. This was done to avoid oversight of the important details. (Truong et al., 2022). The same rigor was sustained across the entire analysis to increase trustworthiness, and a trail of evidence was maintained to describe analytical procedures and the development of themes (Ullah et al., 2024). Thematic analysis integrated and compared the views of the stakeholders and identified convergent and divergent experiences of members of the same analytical groups (Skafida et al., 2022).

To add to the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the analytical process incorporated reflexive practices. Reflexivity means that the researcher is continuously aware of their own beliefs and assumptions and how they may be impacting the interpolation of the data. This is crucial with the emotionally charged subject of child sexual abuse and the experiences and feelings of the participants (Ashraf et al., 2023). The researcher made a reflexive journal through the entire data collection and analyses and described interpretations, decisions, and reflections on a methodological and personal level as well as theme development (Abbas et al., 2023). This made sure that the conclusions of the analysis were before all the narrations of the participants rather than the assumptions of the researcher. The combination of systematic thematic analysis, iterative coding, an audit trail, and reflexive practices added a flexible approach to producing trustworthy, clear, and in-depth findings on the social, cultural, psychological, and institutional factors of child sexual abuse within religious institutions in Pakistan.

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS: TOPICAL EXAMINATION

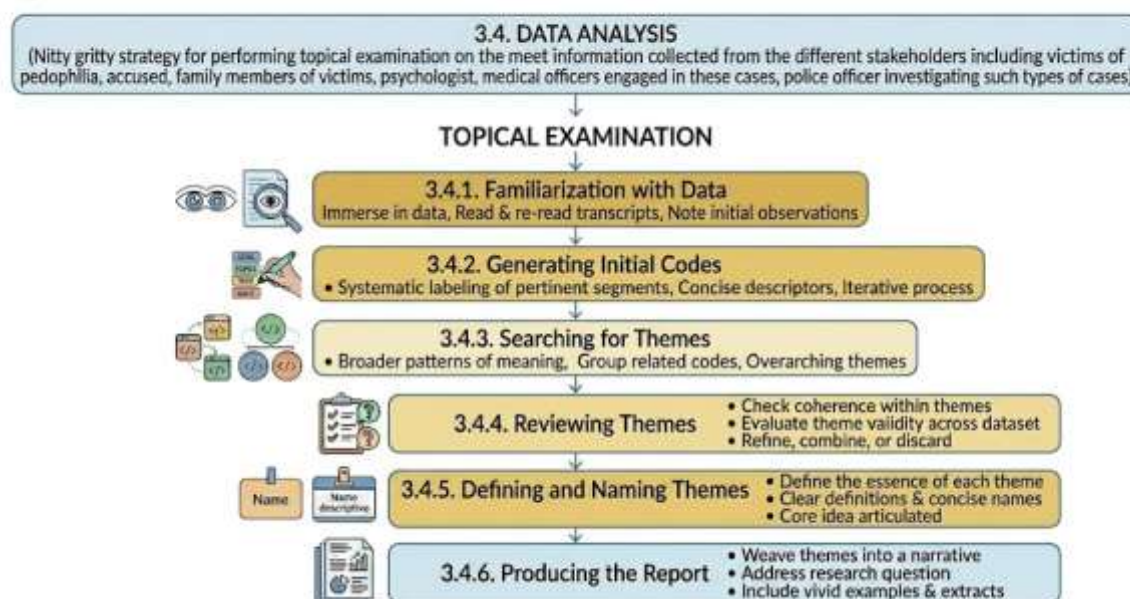


Figure-2: Data Analysis Strategy

4. Results and Analysis

Four major socio-cultural themes related to child sexual abuse in religious institutions in Pakistan were identified through a thematic analysis: power distance and authority culture, gender and sexual norms, stigma and silence, and child socialization. As shown in Table 1, the most occurrences were recorded for stigma and silence (55), followed by gender and sexual norms (54), with power distance and authority culture and child socialization reported at 40 and 38 occurrences, respectively. From these findings, it can be seen that child sexual abuse cannot be analyzed in isolation at the level of the perpetrator; rather, the participants spoke of the wider social norms, cultural values, and institutional relationships, amongst others, that can sustain and strengthen children's vulnerability and constrain reporting. There is other research that pointed out that the experiences of children concerning their abuse and their perception of institutional Reporting is framed by the existing norms and values of the community, cultural and social stigma, power inequality, and the institutions (Mulla and Chowdhury, 2024).

4.1. Power Distance and Authority Culture

The first major theme, Power Distance and Authority Culture, had a total frequency of 40, saying something about the importance participants attributed to differentiating between senior and junior roles in religion and education. This theme had three sub themes: respect for religious authorities (14), the importance of obeying adults in education (13), and the absence of questioning elders (13). Participants' narratives described religious teachers and elders as respected authority figures, whose decisions and behavior would not be questioned by the children and, in some cases, the families. A great emphasis on obedience would lead children to be silent about important issues concerning their well-being when the authority figure is perceived to be morally and religiously above them. Power relationships in the family derive expectations of compliance and silence from children and may result in a unwillingness of parents to challenge a person who is

perceived to have significant religious and social honor. These power imbalances observed in parents' relationships with their children resemble the research on childhood abuse, in which institutional power and social authority increase children's subordination and inhibit abuse reporting (Ali et al., 2023). Power Distance may be explaining why children in religious institutions are expected to obey rather than question, why parents do not challenge authority figures, and why there is reverence and obedience and absence of questioning authority.

4.2. Gender and Sexual Norms

The second theme and probably the most significant one, was Gender and Sexual Norms. This was the first theme that was mentioned the most, with a frequency of 54. Four subcategories were developed: sexual repression in conservative societies (14), gender segregation (13), taboo around the discourse of sexuality (14), and lack of safe and/or healthy sexual outlets (13). Participants related limited social opportunities and expectations of conservatism primarily to the following issues: limited or no means for young people to learn about sexuality and its boundaries, and how to behave and interact. Participants also related gender segregation to the absence of the opportunity for young people to openly discuss their sexual concerns and to the presence of barriers to children asking questions and reporting unwanted sexual experiences. Participants related the combination of gender segregation and the cultural taboo on sexuality to children having no means for protecting themselves. These results support other studies. They demonstrate that specific conservative gender norms, limited or no sexual education, and the societal discomfort regarding sexuality contribute to a lack of ability among children to protect themselves, and create a barrier to the disclosure of unwanted experiences (Arnez & Nisa, 2024). The results support the argument and illustrate that the gender norms and the construction of sexuality within various cultures provide important contexts that must be addressed before the development of child protection programs and child awareness programs in religious organizations.

4.3. Stigma and Silence

Stigma and Silence was the most dominant socio-cultural theme, occurring 55 times. Four aligning subthemes included: victim blaming (13), family honor or izzat (14), fear of social consequences (14), and abuse culture (14). The narratives of the participants indicated that the reputation and honor of the family may stop both the victim and their family from discussing the abuse or from seeking help. Victim blaming may shift the focus from the act of the accused perpetrator to the victim and the character of the victim and the circumstances of the crime to shame them and discourage victims from talking. Participants expressed the possible community reactions, social criticism, and the family honor being tarnished as the reason behind the silence. Abuse will remain hidden from the world if families perceive the consequences of talking about abuse to be in the negative and within the realm of social costs. This further supports previous studies conducted in Pakistan in which stigma, family honor, and cultural and social barriers to reporting child sexual abuse were studied in detail (Tabassum & Tabassum, 2022). Recent studies confirmed that societal and cultural norms also play a role in effecting the abuse response of victims and their families (Kattula et al., 2025). Based on these assumptions, stigma and silence create a barrier for victimized persons to receive timely support and assistance.

4.4. Child Socialization Practices

Child Socialization Practices had a frequency of 38 and had three categories: corporal punishment is normalized (13), emotional suppression in children (12), and insufficient autonomy for children (13). The participants noted strict discipline often aligns with religious and school-based practices and results in socialization of children to comply with adult instructions. The normalization of corporal punishment can desensitize children to think harsh treatment by adults is a legitimate form of discipline and therefore, makes it challenging for children to tell the difference between legitimate adult behavior and illegitimate conduct. It contains the same effect as emotional suppression where children are unable to articulate their feelings and lack of autonomy where children are unable to determine restrictive or abusive behavior. These findings complement other child protection studies that explain socialization of children to certain norms and disciplinary practices, as a result of power imbalance between adults and children, significantly affects children's capacity to identify, resist, and speak on the abuse they experience (Sarfraz et al., 2025). From the findings, we observe the importance of socialization in Family and Religious Education in the understanding of children regarding acceptable adult behavior, boundaries, personal autonomy, and the identification of legitimate and illegitimate behavior and disclosure.

Table 1 shows that the factors related to child sexual abuse are more interconnected than not connected. The dominance of 'stigma and silence,' as well as gender and sexual norms and values, and the cultural values of power distance and authority show that child sexual abuse may have a deep-rooted presence in the culture, structures, and institutions of a society. The findings suggest that concerns about family honor and fear of social sanctions may be further contributing to an environment with little child autonomy that maintains or tolerates child abuse. This is also consistent with existing research which analyzes the effects of social structures, cultural norms, and institutions of Authority that address the protection of children in Pakistan (Zulkarnain et al., 2025).

SOCIO-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS: A WORD TREE ANALYSIS

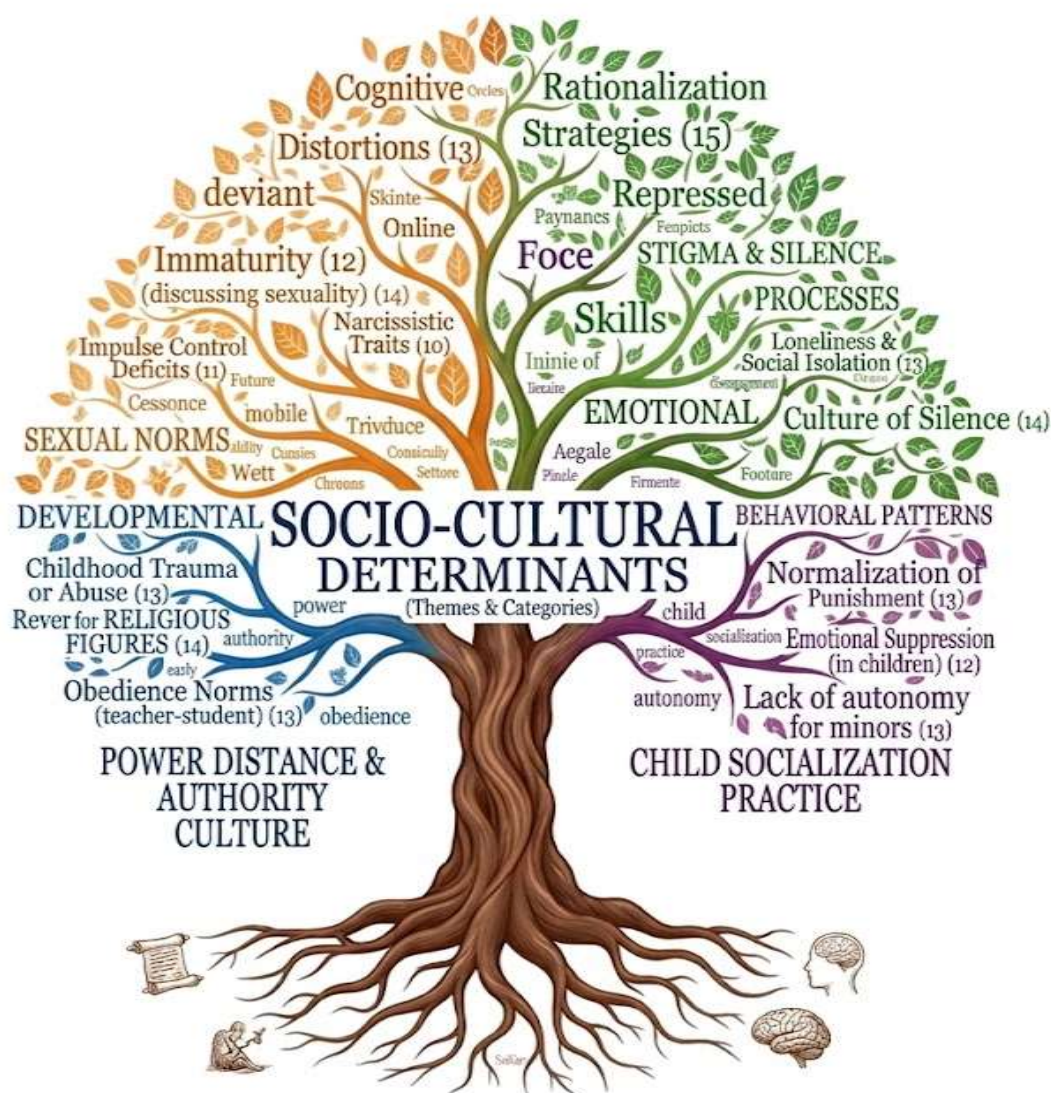


Table-9: Socio-Cultural Determinants

Figure-4: Social and Cultural Determinants Child Abuse in Religious Institutions.**5. Discussions**

This study found that factors contributing to child sexual abuse in religious places in Pakistan are multi-layered and embedded within the social-cultural framework, and cannot be attributed to individual-level factors. The findings revealed four main themes: power distance and authority culture, gender and sexual norms, stigma and silence, and child socialization. Stigma and silence and gender and sexual norms were the most noted themes, followed by power distance and authority culture and child socialization. The

findings show that the cultural expectations of authority, sexuality, family honor, and child behavior may collectively impact children's vulnerability, their ability to identify and determine appropriate vs. inappropriate conduct, and their willingness to share their abuse victimization. From a research perspective, this is also confirmed by the studies showing that social and cultural norms are essential elements shaping the risk of child sexual abuse and the community response to reported abuse (Salwa et al., 2025). Consequently, this study adds to the existing literature by highlighting that child sexual abuse at religious institutions needs to be viewed in its broader sociocultural context and its institutional context, rather than from the perspective of individual apprehension or conduct (Siddiqui & Schultze-Krumbholz, 2023).

First, former students described power disparities in the classroom among children, religious teachers, and the adult participants. Students described the elders and religious teachers as being treated with extreme respect and obedience with unwillingness to question. Former students described family members as being unwilling to question or challenge people of religious and/or social authority. Current literature suggests that hierarchical relationships in institutions create power imbalances that negatively impact children and may lead them to fail to report abuse and be unwilling to confront abuse and/or disruptive or inappropriate behavior (Khan et al. 2021). This finding has great importance as it provides a new avenue in the conversation around divorce and children. It shows that the lines between legitimate authority and power or command must be recognized. It is particularly important in the teaching of authority, where obedience is prized the most, to the social and religious value of compliance, where children may perceive a lack of questioning as irreligious. It creates a potentially abusive environment where it is difficult to identify, challenge, and report abuse. This implies that religious authority should not be challenged but, in order to provide safeguarding children, there should be a recognition that balanced authority and autonomy are not mutually exclusive (Anwer et al. 2024).

These findings relate to norms of gender and sexuality, including taboos and limitations of age-appropriate discussion for sexual repression, segregation of genders, and sexuality. From the narratives, it appears that the participants' cultures avoid speaking about sexuality, and as a result, children are left without the knowledge of personal boundaries or how to report unwanted behavior. These findings align with current research. It shows that social norms of conservatism and avoidance of discussions that reflect on sexuality create barriers to providing sexual education and allowing children to disclose cases of abuse (Rashid & Barron, 2023). The findings do not argue that conservative values of sexuality and silence around the same issue facilitate cases of child sexual abuse. Rather, the absence of appropriate safeguarding education may contribute to the child's vulnerability. So also, while there could be situated cultural and/or religious justifications for gender segregation, the restrictions it imposes may stand in the way of a child having access to a known and trusted adult. So, in these findings, we are projecting the need for trained cultural and religious safety advocates to educate children on issues of boundaries and behavior with a focus on reporting and maintaining cultural and religious values (Russell et al., 2020).

The third main finding was stigma and silence. This included victim-blaming, family honor (or izzat) and the potential for social backlash, as well as a culture of silence in the face of abuse. The prevalence of this finding suggests that social consequences of disclosure may be particularly salient for victims and their families. Participants spoke about the reputation of the family and the community, relationships within the family,

and social status and individually, each of these concerns may lead victims' families to remain silent and discourage reporting. This finding aligns with other Pakistani research which focuses on stigma and honor, social pressure and the fear of the social and legal consequences of reporting child sexual abuse (Jabeen & Abbas, 2025). It supports the argument that the relative absence of child sexual abuse victimization cases reported is likely a significant underestimation of the actual occurrence, as victims and their families perceive social costs of reporting and disclosure (Okafor et al., 2022). The findings of this study confirmed that victim-blaming in the community transfers responsibility to the child victim and fails to focus on the conduct of the adult alleged perpetrator. Child sexual abuse in religious institutions requires both institutional safeguards, as well as community-based approaches to victim blaming, family confidentiality and supportive responses to child disclosures and re-framing child protection as child reporting (Abrams et al., 2021).

5.2. Practical/Managerial Implications

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. They pertain to religious institutions, policymakers, protection agencies, families, educators, and law-enforcement. Religious institutions are mandated to formulate child safeguarding policies and accessible complaint mechanisms for their constituents. they should develop complaint channels that are independent and codes of conduct for religious teachers. Sustained child safeguarding efforts should be made by training teachers and managing staff on a regular basis (Razzaq et al., 2023). Particular emphasis should be placed on the mitigation of the power distance to an extent that safe reporting and locus of assistance seeking mechanisms be provided to children to enable them to report or question freely without apprehension of being punished or retaliated socially. Families and communities should stop the victim blaming approach and be more supportive; they should appreciate that the protection of the child from abuse rank more important than the institutional or family reputations (Raza et al. 2023). Awareness programmes should protect the dignity of the child in context of their developmental age and should equip the child to recognize and report abuse. Policymakers and child-protection agencies can use the results of this study to strengthen the religious educational institutions' monitoring and accountability systems and the development of child-family trusted and confidential reporting systems. Culturally specific interventions may be advanced in religious educational institutions to promote accountability, protection and reporting (Shah & Lashari, 2023).

5.3. Limitations and Avenue for Further Studies

This study has acknowledged its own limitations. The first concerns the design and sampling methodology of the interviews and focus groups of 35 interview participants and eight focus groups. Relatively speaking, this restricts the findings to the 35 participants and eight focus groups. The second limitation concerns the highly sensitive issue of child sexual abuse or assault. This may have caused participants to self-censor, resulting in either a lack of reporting or "socially acceptable" responding. The focus group interviews were directed at the stakeholder groups, yet the group did not include the children that were abused. This is due to ethical concerns and dilemmas that come with interviewing children. The recommended future research would conduct longitudinal, mixed-method, and comparative studies to see if the social and cultural determinants identified are different in the various religious institutions in Pakistan's different provinces and socio-institutional contexts. Quantitative studies could make and validate tools to assess power distance, stigma, silence, and gender socialization and the autonomy of children, to study

their impact on disclosure and safeguarding. Future qualitative research would benefit by including all children, focusing on parents and survivors, religious figures, and professionals and administrators of the institutions. It would provide a more holistic understanding of the institutional design of appropriate child safeguarding measures in Pakistani religious institutions.

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