

Every Drop Matters!!!

Child abuse is gradually transforming from a taboo to a matter of discussion especially after the Zainab Ansari case that created an uproar in the whole country. Civil society always raised voices on this haunting crime but we are always told “Not to instigate **Western Agenda**” and we were always called “Western Agents”. The result is, many cases remain unreported, the perpetrators go unpunished, and the horrendous offence keeps on increasing.

We always raise flags that the perpetrator might be a family member and this is due to communication gap between parents and their children and their blind trust for family members contributes to child abuse. But we are always called that we are hurting our **social values**. Now the time has shown that it was neither a matter of shame nor a stance of shaking social values but it is a matter of serious attention and taking serious measures at all levels.

Ujala Network has always put continuous effort to raise voice on such issues at every possible platform. The results of our study and fact sheets that also highlighted the issue with policy makers. Our Ujala partners working at grassroots level not only sensitized the masses but also created demand for strict and robust actions at policy level that resulted in the form of ZARRA. We always advocated through media platforms, dialogues with parliamentarians, government departments and grassroots mobilization with parents, teachers, doctors, community influencers, Young people to highlight the importance of remedial measures vis-à-vis child protection not only at policy level but also its strict enactment. Consequently, in result of uninterrupted advocacy, now we have recent important development in the form of Zainab Alert, Response, and Recovery Act (ZAARA) 2020, however, the transformation is at a much slower pace as compared to the gravity of this offence.

The step was taken by the government in the form of formation of Zainab Alert, Response and Recovery Act 2020 (ZARRA). It has created hopes for better countering of child abuse by the introduction of an integrated framework. The agency shall have many powers including powers to coordinate with Pakistan Telecommunication Authority for issuance of alerts of an abducted child through SMSs, with Pakistan Electronic Telecommunication Authority for tickers on TV and announcement on Radio stations etc. Along with this a nation-wide toll-free number 1099 shall be activated that can be used by any person of the country to report a missing child. Another important feature of the Act is that it has provided a swift mechanism of the reporting of a missing child. According to the Act, the missing child report shall be filed within two hours by the police and the concerned police station shall forward the information to ZARRA Agency. The Act has put forth the punishment of the offender that shall be a minimum ten years and maximum life imprisonment with a fine of one million rupees. Hence, the Act is an important step towards the reporting and punishment of the heinous offence against innocent children.

Nonetheless, this is not enough as the government needs to ensure proper implementation of the Act because without implementation a piece of legislation doesn't remain of much value. In our forums like dialogues with parliamentarians, media campaigning and community sensitization we educate and inform them that child sexual abuse affects not only the life of a child but of the whole society at large. However, such abuse inflicts the greatest harm to the psychological, emotional and physical development of an innocent child. Child abuse leaves permanent marks on its victims which often go unseen. But these intense marks create a suffocating internal environment for the victims that hinder their individual and social growth.

Though, the ZARRA (Act) is a great step but the menace of child abuse cannot only be tackled by the government; various segments of society including need to play their due roles in this respect. The most important part in this context that we are sensitizing community and other stakeholders about are role of the family and teachers. They play a vital role in the upbringing of a child. It is required that a child be made aware of the right and wrong contacts and behaviors of the people around him/her by its own family. When the children are made aware proactively then they become prepared enough to deal with such situations and complain about them accordingly. We as Ujala Network take the pride in being a drop of brining this positive change in the society due to strong and collective voices from **Community people to Parliament**. Due to constitutional challenges this Act would be enacted in Islamabad Capital Territory only but we will advocate for its adoption in all four provinces and regions as well to make our children safer and to make them able to live an informed life.

ZARRA 2020 is a classic example of Ujala Networks strengths of, grassroots mobilization for creating demands of pro-people legislation, engagement with Parliamentarians and media for better advocacy and policy influences.
