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How Pakistan's Anti-Rape Crisis Cells are transforming support for survivors

Survivors of sexual violence are finding hope and support through one-stop crisis centres that provide medical, legal and psychological care.

Nadia*, a young tutor from Karachi, Pakistan, never imagined that a simple WhatsApp message would change her life forever. It began innocently — a message from a trusted neighbor she had known for years. But soon, they became more personal, invasive, and made her feel uncomfortable. Nadia didn't know where to turn for help or how to report the harassment.

From screens to real life: Digital violence is real violence

One afternoon, the same neighbour forced his way into her home and assaulted her.

“He overpowered me”, she recalls. “I was paralyzed by fear and blacked out.”

In the past five years, about [1.8 million women in Pakistan have faced cyber-crimes](#) such as harassment and blackmail, yet only 3.5 per cent of perpetrators have been convicted. In 2023, [the Digital Rights Foundation's Helpline received 2,473 complaints](#) — 59 per cent from women — most of them had been harassed through WhatsApp or Facebook.

[Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act \(PECA\)](#) 2016 criminalizes cyberstalking, blackmail, and non-consensual sharing of personal data, with penalties of up to three years in prison and fines of one million rupees. However, weak enforcement, limited awareness, and stigma continue to deter women from seeking justice.

What survivors need – access to medical, legal, and psychological support under one roof

On the day of her attack, Nadia woke up in the hospital. The empathy and understanding she felt from her mother, the medical staff and the police was the starting point of her recovery.

Her parents brought her to Pakistan's first Anti-Rape Crisis Cell (ARCC), established in Karachi in 2023 with support from UN Women and the U.S. Embassy's Office of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL). It provides medical treatment, psychosocial counselling, legal guidance and forensic support, all under one roof, and open 24 hours every day.

Therapy and supportive counseling reminded Nadia that the attack wasn't her fault, and slowly restored her sense of self and security.

“For the first time since the attack, I felt I wasn't alone. The Anti-Rape Crisis Cell gave me my voice back,” shared Nadia. *“I have the strength to demand justice – not just for me, but for every woman who has been silenced.”*

New Anti-Rape Crisis Cells are closing justice gaps and empowering survivors to reclaim their lives

Sexual violence is widespread in Pakistan. According to the [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#), in 2023, 6,624 rape cases were registered nationwide – that’s one woman raped every 45 minutes. But conviction rates remain low, because of pervasive social stigma, inadequate police investigations and forensic practices, judicial and procedural delays, and entrenched impunity.

Following the [motorway gang rape](#) in 2020, public outrage at victim-blaming by officials led to the passage of the Anti-Rape Act 2021, which introduced stronger protections, standardized medical and legal procedures, and established Anti Rape Crisis Cells. But laws only work when they are enforced and budgeted. With INL’s support, UN Women helped the Government of Pakistan develop implementation procedures for the crisis cells. As a result, Anti-Rape Crisis Cells are now mandatory in government hospitals as one-stop facilities for survivors.

“Over the years, we have witnessed countless cases of sexual violence in Pakistan”, explains Dr. Summaiya Syed, Chief Police Surgeon, Karachi. “The concept of the crisis cell is transformative: it brings together all essential services – medical and psychological support, evidence collection and preservation, forensic analysis, assistance in First Information Report (FIR) registration and legal aid – under one roof, ensuring survivors receive justice with dignity.”

What began as a single centre in Karachi has now evolved into a lifeline for hundreds across Pakistan. Six Anti-Rape Crisis Cells in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore (two sites), Multan and Rawalpindi operate within government hospitals and are linked to police reporting centres. In 2024 alone, they delivered essential medical, legal and psychological services to 437 survivors of sexual violence, including 219 children.

“In many cases, medical/legal officers are not properly trained on drafting reports”, which weakens the legal case against perpetrators, explains Chaudhary Muhammad Jahangir, Director General of the Centre for Professional Development of Public Prosecutors. Staffed with trained legal and medical officers, the crisis cells are now closing that gap.

“The Anti-Rape Crisis Cells embody hope and resilience”, adds Jamshed M. Kazi, UN Women Representative in Pakistan.

Nadia’s perpetrator was arrested and charged under the Anti-Rape Act. The proceedings are ongoing, but she now feels empowered and in control of her life again. She’s returned to teaching and has become an advocate for other survivors, guiding them towards support and justice.

“No woman should ever endure what I went through. But if they do, I want them to know they are not alone”, she says.

The expansion of the Anti-Rape Crisis Cells marks a significant milestone as Pakistan advances its commitments under the Beijing+30 commitments. As it mobilizes efforts during the 16 Days of Activism, the focus remains clear: build systems that protect, empower and deliver justice for every survivor of sexual violence.

**Name changed to protect the survivor’s identity.*

16 Days of Activism: #NoExcuse for online abuse

Online and digital spaces should empower women and girls. Yet every day, for millions of women and girls the digital world has become a minefield of harassment, abuse, and control.

From 25 November to 10 December join the UNiTE campaign to learn about and take action to stop digital abuse against women and girls.

