

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Study on: Child Sexual Abuse among the Urban Population: Knowledge, Experiences and Attitude

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Statistics show that most children have faced some form of sexual abuse at some point. This study aims at studying this pattern among the urban college students so we can work towards formulating better policies to educate children and their parents regarding this relevant psychosocial issue.

Material and Methods: This was a cross sectional study done among medical students from ACMS, New Delhi with consent; with approval of the IEC. Google forms were used.

The questionnaire assessed demography, occurrence of prior CSA, details, knowledge of POCSO, actions taken, etc. None of the questions breach their anonymity.

Results: Out of 230 participants who consented to the study, 52 reported to have experienced some form of sexual abuse during childhood, most of the victims were adolescent females, most victims had experienced inappropriate touch and groping. All the abusers were male with maximum being known to the victim. Most victims did not report their experience, and even in the reported cases, no action was taken. Most victims experienced fear and shame following the incident. Knowledge about POCSO was present in almost 50% of the participants, and most participants had not been educated about recognising signs of sexual abuse by their parents or guardians.

Conclusion: Child sexual abuse is a dark reality that is common in India and adversely impacts mental health. This study highlights the crucial and under-discussed issue of CSA within urban populations, exploring knowledge and experiences that shape understanding and response to this grave concern.

KEYWORDS:

• Child Abuse • Sexual Abuse • Pocso Act • Sexual Violence

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INTRODUCTION

Children are often considered a highly vulnerable group very likely to suffer physical or mental abuse including sexual abuse, which is increasing in an exponential and devastating manner worldwide. Statistics show that most children and young adults have faced some sort of sexual abuse of varied grades at some point in their lives.

The WHO defines child sexual abuse (CSA) as – when a child is involved in any sexual activity that the child does not understand and is therefore unable to give consent and the child may not be mentally matured enough to understand the consequences of giving or not giving consent, and also which violates the societal norms and laws.¹

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported that crimes against children increased by 4.5% in 2019 as compared to 2018. Out of a total of, 185 various crimes against children reported in 2019 in India, 31.2% cases of these crimes against children were registered under the POCSO Act, 2012 which means 31.2% was some sort of sexual crime. This data further reported that in 2018 approximately 109 children were sexually exploited every day. This showed a 22% rise in such cases from the previous year. Out of 21,605 child rape cases recorded in 2018, there were 21,401 female victims and 204 male victims showing that even though male children are not safe and form a vulnerable group.²

Before 2012 no specific laws existed for catering mainly to protecting children from sexual offences and also mete out adequate and just punishments to the perpetrators of these heinous crimes. To deal with lacuna of laws against child sexual abuse cases, the Government brought in a special law, namely, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 which came into force with effect from 14th November, 2012. The highlight of this Act is, that it is gender neutral in terms of both victim and perpetrator considering male children can also be victims and female perpetrators also exist. The Act also includes a variety of offences and their punishments including penetrative sexual assault, aggravated penetrative sexual assault, sexual assault, aggravated sexual assault, sexual harassment, using child for pornographic purpose, and trafficking of children for sexual purposes.³

This study aims at studying this pattern of CSA among the urban, educated college students, their experiences and response to CSA and their knowledge about the legal recourses available. This kind of study is required in a large scale so that we can work towards understanding this issue in depth and formulate better, more effective strategies to educate children and their parents/guardians in recognising, reporting and preventing this psychosocial problem.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This was a cross sectional study done among medical students from ACMS, New Delhi after approval of the institutional ethics committee. They were given an anonymous hard copy of questionnaire. The questionnaire itself had a column for recording consent. Only if the students consented, they were asked to fill up the rest of the form. They were then requested to submit the forms anonymously in a box kept in the Department of FMT.

Out of 100 students who were given the hard copies initially, only 8 responses were received, rest 92 did not respond so thereafter google forms were used where the response was better.

The questionnaire assessed demography, occurrence of prior CSA, details of the sexual abuse, knowledge of legal recourses, actions taken, etc. None of the questions in any way breach their anonymity.

Sample size: 230

Questionnaire with consent form were given to 400 students of all batches of MBBS, of which 230 were completed and received, resulting in a response rate of 57.5%. Thus, the effective sample size was 230.

Study duration: 1 month

Inclusion criteria: All MBBS students from ACMS who gave consent to being included in the study.

Exclusion criteria: All MBBS students from ACMS who did not give consent to being included in the study

RESULTS

Out of the total 400 students given the questionnaire, only 230 consented to participate in the study. Out of the 230, 145

(63%) were males and 85 (37%) were females. Maximum participants were in the age group of 20-24 years (70%) with mean age being 20 yrs. Most participants belonged to Hindu religion (222/96.5%).

Knowledge:

Regarding knowledge about what constitutes sexual abuse, all 230 participants knew at least one definition of sexual abuse, with some even coming up with the terms - "molestation, eve teasing, intercourse, masturbation, flashing, exhibitionism, sex trafficking" in the "any other" column, to constitute sexual abuse.

Experience:

Out of 230 participants, 52 - 9 males (6.2%) and 43 females (51%) reported as having been a victim of sexual abuse. 26 males (18%) and 14 females (16.5%) chose not to comment on this question. Out of those who had experienced it, maximum (27) were in the age group of 11-15 yrs (52%) during the incident, 20 being between 16-20 years (38.5%) and 5 being less than 10 yrs (9.6%). Maximum participants (32) had experienced inappropriate touch constituting 61.5%, 15 had experienced groping of private parts including breasts/ genitals and buttocks (29%), 10 had experienced passing of sexually coloured remarks (19.2%), 5 were shown sexual content in photos/books/ videos, etc (9.6%), under "any other" column 6 participants mentioned being flashed at (11.5%), 4 reported having witnessed deliberate masturbation in front of them (8%), many participants sadly having experienced multiple. 56% of the abusers were in the age group of 21 to 30 years. About abuser, all of them were males with 29 being known to the victim (56%) and 23 being unknown (44%). Out of the 29 known abusers, 9 participants chose not to comment on the relation, maximum were relatives (8/28%), next were neighbors (6/21%), drivers and servants being 1 and 3 respectively, 1 was a teacher and 1 was a boyfriend.

Attitude:

Out of the 52 victims, only 9 chose to share about the incidence (17.3%); 5 chose to share with friends, 3 with parents and 1 with teacher. Most (40) were not comfortable sharing about the incident, 7 found it comfortable and 2 found it very comfortable to share.

Even among those who shared the incident, it is sad to report that no action was taken

against the perpetrator even in a single case.

Post the incidents, 71% of the participants reported as having fear of interacting with people as a result of the experience, 67.3% reported fearing about social stigma, 2% had panic attacks, 4% felt depressed, 27% felt they were somehow responsible for the incident and felt shame on having caused it. Only 9.6% or 5 participants felt no after effects of the incident.

On being asked whether any of them had been told or educated about recognizing signs of sexual abuse by parents/guardians or teachers, 67.4% answered no while only 32.6% had been educated about sexual abuse.

Regarding knowledge about the POCSO Act, 138 participants admitted to having knowledge about it while 92 participants were not aware that such a law existed.

No other feedback was received other than the questions asked.

DISCUSSION

The data collected reveals critical insights into the level of awareness, prevalence, and reporting of sexual abuse among young individuals, which leads to formulating better remedial actions, education, and assistance to individuals concerned.

Awareness of Sexual Abuse

One outcome of this study which is promising, is that all the respondents were aware of what constitutes or may constitute sexual abuse, which shows that basic educational interventions through schools, NGOs, social media, etc may be reaching their audience effectively. A study by Dangi et al also illustrated this awareness about CSA⁴ Additionally, the inclusion of terms like molestation, eve teasing, intercourse, and sex trafficking in the "any other" category suggests that many participants have a subtle understanding of the forms sexual abuse can take.⁵

Conversely, an in depth knowledge about sexual abuse still appears to be on shaky ground. While the common forms of inappropriate sexual behaviour like "inappropriate touch" and "groping of private parts", were easily recognized by the participants as forms of sexual abuse; many failed in recognising more subtle or less-discussed forms as sexual abuse – like "passing of sexually coloured

remarks”, or “showing inappropriate/sexual content in photos/books/ magazines/videos,” as forms of sexual abuse. This highlights gaps in comprehensive education around CSA, particularly regarding less obvious or psychological forms.^{6,7}

Prevalence of Abuse

What is scary is that, almost one fourth of the participants reported having experienced sexual abuse of some form. There is a stark gender disparity in this experience with almost half the females having experienced it as compared to very less males. These numbers show that females victims highly outnumber males, though the figure for males may also reflect underreporting due to stigma or disbelief or failure to recognise that males can also be sexually abused.^{4,6}

The results reflected the universal trend that identifies adolescence as a highly vulnerable period which also reflects in the study by Lal *et al*.^{6,7} The nature of abuse reported includes a range of physical, verbal, and psychological acts, with “inappropriate touch being the most common. Ease of access to a child, failure to recognise the “inappropriate touch” as wrong, inability to act or refuse, fear of misunderstanding an innocent act of loving touch, etc all contribute towards ease with which the perpetrators find gratification from the victims through this act. Groping of private parts remain the next common form. Failure of the victim to act or fight back immediately as is the most common case due to surprise, shame and feeling of being violated and feeling dirty leads to the perpetrator getting off and away from the situation immediately and most often no repercussions.⁸

Perpetrators and Relationship to Victim

All abusers were male, which reinforces existing data emphasizing a strong pattern of male perpetrated sexual violence.^{5,8,9} Over 56% of the perpetrators were known to the victim, with relatives being the most common, neighbours were next, servants, drivers, teacher and boyfriends made up the rest as also shown in studies by Costa *et al* and Sarkar *et al*.^{7,9} 9 participants chose not to comment on the relationship with abuser, which itself shows the discomfort at revealing close relations with abuser. This confirms the disturbing reality that abuse often occurs within familiar and supposedly safe environments within the

home and neighbourhood, challenging the belief that home is a sanctuary.

The data also show that the majority of abusers were aged between 21–30, further indicating that young adults are often the perpetrators in these cases. A study by Chacko *et al* also demonstrated that perpetrators were usually below 30 years of age.¹⁰ Adolescent and young males often seek to assert their male supremacy and power through their actions. This can sometimes lead to violent and inappropriate sexual conduct with victims being minors. Widespread use of social media among this age group, lack of productive social engagement, more exposure to sexual content and attempt to realize this fantasies in normal life, also leads to this kind of aggressive sexual behaviour, often with minors as they are easy targets and less likely to fight back.¹¹

REPORTING AND COMFORT IN DISCLOSURE

The findings reveal a very low reporting rate—only 17.3% informed anyone, with friends being the most likely confidants. Parents and teachers were informed in fewer cases, pointing to a lack of trust or fear of not being believed. The emotional burden is further highlighted by the fact that 77% felt uncomfortable sharing their experience. India is a country where victim blaming is blatantly practised.^{12,13} It is often shown in news, social media, etc that whenever an act of sexual violence occurs, there is often a faction of society who starts shifting the spotlight on the victim, how her flippant behaviour, the clothes she was wearing, her loose character and morals, etc must have contributed to the sexual violence occurring. When this is the stance of society, which genuine victim would like to bring attention to her plight?

When the perpetrator is a relative or close friend, the reporting of the crime becomes even more unlikely as failure to believe the victim seems the most likely reaction, blaming her/him for misunderstanding an innocent/loving action.¹⁴

The case is even worse with when the victim is a boy. Most people are still of the mindset that boys cannot be molested just for the reason that they are males. This combined with the fact that boys are taught at a young age that they have to be tough and strong to be masculine, deter them further from reporting

any sign of being sexually abused as that may harm the image of their masculinity.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

No cases were reported as having resulted in any action, raising serious concerns about people's attitude towards sexual violence, specially the less obvious forms and dismissing the incidents as frivolous and insignificant, of no consequence and denying access to justice or protection for the victim.

Psychological and Emotional Effects

The emotional impact was significant: 71% reported experiencing "a fear of interacting with people", 67.3% experienced "fear of social stigma" and others reported anxiety, depression, and shame. While only 9.6% said they felt "no effect," again this may show just bravado and trying to hide the aftereffects of the incident. Inability to share the trauma, fear of being disbelieved, fear of being blamed for having caused the incident all contribute to victim being mentally traumatised for life.¹⁷

AWARENESS OF POCSO AND CHILD ABUSE BELIEFS

While 60% were aware of the POCSO Act (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act). Most of these participants were in the third and final year of MBBS where sexual jurisprudence had been taught in Forensic Medicine and had been positively educated about various aspects of sexual assault and POCSO.^{4,10} Rest who knew about it, read about in newspapers and through social media. None of them reported as having been taught about it through parents or guardians. 40% were not aware of POCSO. This gap between awareness and acknowledgement suggests a trend of sweeping uncomfortable truths under the carpet and leads to deterrence in disclosure and lack of action.

Overall Implications

The data collected shows a disturbing trend: while superficial awareness of sexual abuse exists among most participants the actual experiences of abuse, lack of avenues for reporting, discomfort in disclosure, and lack of quick legal action point towards a comprehensive failure in our societal systems, for prevention and remedy of this issue.

Suggestions¹⁸⁻²⁰

- Concentrated, comprehensive, age-

appropriate education on sexual abuse that goes beyond definitions to include consent, recognizing inappropriate behaviour, and how to share, communicate and report.

- Stronger support systems at home, schools and communities to enable children to communicate effectively and easily without any fear, pressure or shame.
- Swift and appropriate legal actions to ensure that abusers are punished and survivors are protected.
- Gender-sensitive approaches that acknowledge that even boys can be victims and encourage both boys and girls to come forward in such instances.
- Change in perspectives to remove the silence and lack of dialogue around abuse within families and communities.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the pressing and often under-discussed issue of child sexual abuse (CSA) within urban populations, exploring the knowledge, experiences, and attitudes that shape public understanding and response to this grave concern. The findings indicate a significant gap in awareness and understanding of CSA, even though there is an increased and easy access to information in urban settings. While most participant showed a general awareness about the existence of CSA, many failed in understanding and recognizing its signs, long-term psychological effects, and the necessary avenues for intervention and reporting.

The above data reveal a disturbing prevalence of abuse, often occurring in familiar and supposedly safe environments, highlighting the importance of awareness and education among families and communities. Analysis of attitude further suggest that social stigma, victim-blaming, and discomfort around discussions of sexuality continue to act as major barriers to open dialogue, timely reporting, and supportive action.

It is vital that urban communities strengthen education and awareness programs, including school-based awareness programs, parental guidance workshops, and more accessible support systems for victims. Only through

continued public education, change in attitude, and stronger legal responses can we hope to lessen the incidence of child sexual abuse and build a safer environment for children.

Due to the small sample size, findings could not be generalized for the entire population, but still the data collected, reflects similar trends as reported in many studies done in the same field. A larger scale study is necessary to provide more insightful data to be more reflective of our Indian society.

But what is alarming is that even with a small study size of 230 participants, 52 that is 23% of the participants had experienced some form of sexual abuse. So it is clear how big this issue is, how much goes unreported and how much needs to be done so that this issue of CSA is addressed, people educated, more avenues for reporting and action to be taken highlighted and made accessible.

Conflict of Interest: None

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