

Original Research Article

Awareness and attitude of mothers of primary school children towards child sexual abuse in Tamil Nadu, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child sexual abuse leads to several adverse impacts in the affected children. A study on awareness and attitude of mothers towards child sexual abuse will help to formulate better techniques to improve awareness and prevent child sexual abuse. The objective is to study the awareness and attitude of mothers of primary school students towards child sexual abuse.

Methods: This cross-sectional observational study was done in the state of Tamil Nadu, India among 186 mothers of primary school children. Data were collected from the mothers using a predesigned questionnaire and analyzed.

Results: Only 12.9% of the mothers were aware of the POCSO Act and 32.8% were aware of the child helpline 1098. 76.9% of the mothers were aware of unexplained genital injury as a physical indicator of child sexual abuse. Acute traumatic response (83.9%) and regression in behavior (82.8%) were the commonly aware behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse. Only 25.3% of the mothers believed that boys can be sexually abused. 75.3% of the mothers believed that the offenders were usually unknown persons. 88.7% of the mothers believed that unaccompanied children were a risk factor. 88.2% of the mother believed that physical and mental disability in children was a risk factor. Majority of the mothers believed that streets (88.7%) and institutions (80.1%) were the common environment for child sexual abuse. Only 23.7% of the mothers had taught regarding good touch and bad touch to their children. 50.5% of the mothers believed that the major role in preventing child sexual abuse is played by the parents.

Conclusions: Awareness regarding child sexual abuse was low among the mothers of primary school children.

Keywords: Child helpline India, Child sexual abuse India, Mothers attitude child sexual abuse, Mothers awareness child sexual abuse, Primary school children sexual abuse, POSCO Act

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse has been linked to several adverse impacts in the affected children such as physical effects, poor school performance, behavioral problems, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, social problems, inappropriate sexual behaviors, delinquent behaviors, inability to form meaningful relationships and lack of social competence. 53.22% children reported having faced one of more forms of sexual abuse in the Study on Child Abuse: India (2007) report by Ministry of

Women and Child Development - Government India.¹ The protection of children from sexual offences (POCSO) act 2012 was amended in 2019 to provide more stringent punishments for sexual offences against children.²⁻⁵

Mothers play a dominant role in child rearing in India. And hence a study on the awareness and attitude of mothers towards child sexual abuse will help to formulate better techniques to improve awareness and prevent child sexual abuse. The objective of this study was to find the

awareness and the attitude of mothers of primary school students towards child sexual abuse in the state of Tamil Nadu, India.

METHODS

This cross-sectional observational study was conducted at the state of Tamil Nadu, India among 186 mothers of children studying at primary school. The study was conducted over one month (October 2019). Inclusion criteria for the study was mothers of children studying in primary school who were willing to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria for the study was mothers of children studying in primary school who were not willing to participate in the study. After obtaining informed consent, demographic details and data regarding awareness and attitude towards child sexual abuse were collected from the mothers using a pre-designed and pretested questionnaire. Data collected were analyzed by suitable statistical methods using SPSS 25 software.

RESULTS

Of the 186 mothers, 65(34.9%) had only male children, 54(29.1%) had only female children and 67(36.0%) had both male and female children. 148(79.6%) mothers were in the age group of 24 to 35 years, 36(19.3%) in the age group of 36 to 45 years and 2(1.1%) were in the age group of 46 to 60 years.

As per Modified Kuppusamy’s Socio economic status scale, 3.8% belonged to Class I (Upper), 23.7% were Class II (Upper Middle), 30.1% were Class III (Middle), 29.0% belonged to Class IV (Upper Lower) and 13.4% belonged to Class V (Lower). 119(63.9%) of the participants belonged to joint family and 67 (36.1%) of the participants belong to nuclear family (Table 1). The demographic distribution as per the participant’s education and occupation is shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the mothers (based on age, gender, socioeconomic status and family type).

Age group	24 to 35 years	148 (79.6%)
	36 to 45 years	36(19.3%)
	46 to 60 years	2(1.1%)
Gender of Children	Male children	65(34.9%)
	Female children	54(29.1%)
	Both Male and Female children	67(36.0%)
Socioeconomic Status	Class I (Upper)	7(3.8%)
	Class II (Upper Middle)	44(23.7%)
	Class III (Middle)	56(30.1%)
	Class IV (Upper Lower)	54(29.0%)
	Class V (Lower)	25(13.4%)
Family type	Joint Family	119(63.9%)
	Nuclear Family	67(36.1%)

Of the 186 mothers studied, majority (45.7%) believed that the number of child sexual abuse in the state of Tamil Nadu is between 500 to 1000 cases per year, followed by 1001 to 1500 cases (20.4%), below 500 cases (17.8%) and above 1500 cases per year (16.1%) (Figure 1).

Table 2: Demographic profile of the mothers (based on occupation and education).

Occupation	Home maker	77(41.4%)
	Unskilled/ Semiskilled	13(6.9%)
	Skilled	20(10.8%)
	Clerical/Shop Owner/Farm	16(8.6%)
	Semi professional	24(12.9%)
	Professional	36(19.4%)
Education	Illiterate	0(0%)
	Primary	21(11.3%)
	Middle/High School	40(21.5%)
	Higher Secondary	34(18.3%)
	Graduate	32(17.2%)
	Professional	59(31.7%)

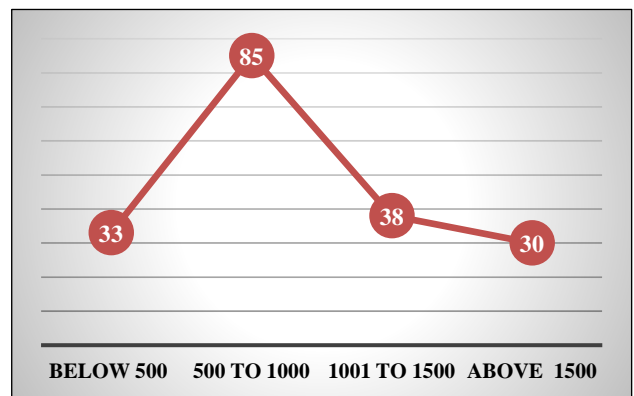


Figure 1: Mother’s attitude towards number of child sexual abuse cases in Tamil Nadu per year.

Of the 186 mothers who participated in the study, only 24 mothers (12.9%) were aware of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act (Figure 1). Of these 24 mothers, 8(33.3%) were in healthcare profession, 6(25%) in legal profession and 8(33.3%) were teachers and 2(8.4%) were home makers as shown in Figure 2.

Out of the 186 participating mothers, only 61 mothers (32.8%) were aware about the 24 hours toll free child helpline in India (1098) as shown in Figure 3. Most of the mothers (76.9%) were aware of unexplained genital injury as a physical indicator of child sexual abuse. But the awareness of other physical indicators of child sexual abuse were low among mothers (Table 3). The awareness of mothers regarding various behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse is shown in Table 4. Acute traumatic response (83.9%) and regression in behavior (82.8%)

were the commonly aware behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse in this study.

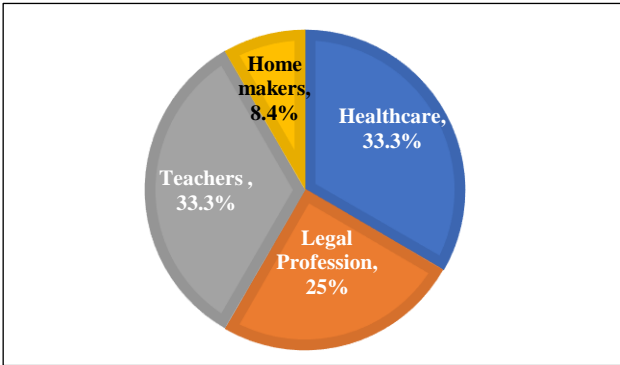


Figure 2: Occupation wise distribution of mothers aware of the POSCO Act (24 mothers).

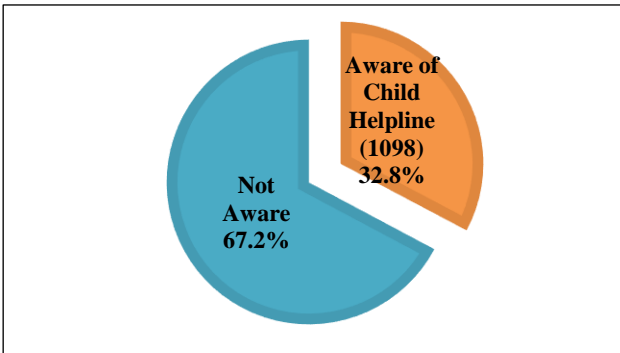


Figure 3: Awareness about child helpline (1098).

Table 3: Awareness of mothers regarding physical indicators of child sexual abuse.

Physical indicators of child sexual abuse	Mothers aware of the physical indicator (n=186)
Unexplained genital injury	143(76.9%)
Recurrent vulvovaginitis	25(13.4%)
Vaginal or penile discharge	28(15.1%)
Bedwetting and fecal soiling beyond the usual age	18(9.7%)
Anal complaints	24(12.9%)
Pain on urination	27(14.5%)
Sexually transmitted infections	46(24.7%)

The awareness regarding child sexual abuse in boys among mothers was very low with only 47(25.3%) of the mothers believing that both boys can be sexually abused. (Figure 4).

Regarding attitude towards offender’s relationship to the child victim, 75.3% of the mothers believed that the offenders were usually unknown persons, 63.5% believed that offenders were usually family members, followed by family friends (52.7%), neighbors (50.5%), other known persons (48.9%) and online friends (34.4%) (Figure 5).

A 100% of the participating mothers believed that female gender is a risk factor for child sexual abuse. 88.7% of the mothers believed that unaccompanied children were a risk factor. 88.2% of the mother believed that physical and mental disability in children was a risk factor. Percentage of mothers believing in other risk factors is shown in Table 5.

Table 4: Awareness of mothers regarding Behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse.

Behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse	Mothers aware of the behavioral indicator (n=186)
Regression in behavior	154(82.8%)
Regression in school performance	96(51.6%)
Problems at School	105(56.5%)
Acute traumatic response such as clingy behavior and irritability	156(83.9%)
Sleep disturbances	102(54.8%)
Eating disorders	95(51.1%)
Social problems	99(53.2%)
Depression	141(75.8%)
Poor self-esteem	121(65.1%)
Inappropriate sexualized behaviors	98(52.7%)

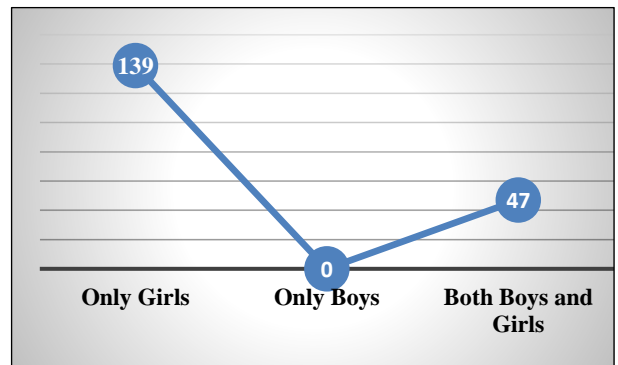


Figure 4: Mother's attitude towards gender of child sexual abuse victims.

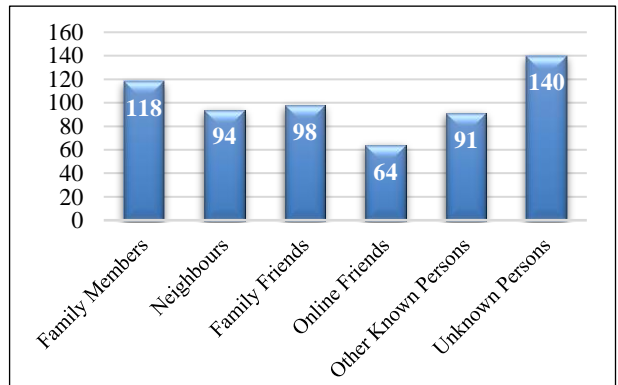


Figure 5: Mother's attitude towards offender's relationship to child victim.

Table 5: Risk factors of child sexual abuse.

Risk factors of child sexual abuse	Mothers believing in the risk factor(n = 186)
Female gender	186(100%)
Physically or mentally disabled children	164(88.2%)
Social isolation	102(54.8%)
Broken homes	98(52.7%)
Single parent homes	91(48.9%)
Unaccompanied children	165(88.7%)
Children in institutions	143(76.9%)
Parents with alcohol or drug dependence	123(66.1%)
Poor socioeconomic status	132(71.0%)
History of past abuse	89(47.8%)

Majority of the mothers believed that streets (88.7%) and institutions (80.1%) were the common environment for child sexual abuse, followed by work (52.7%), family environment (36.0%) and school (27.9%) (Figure 6).

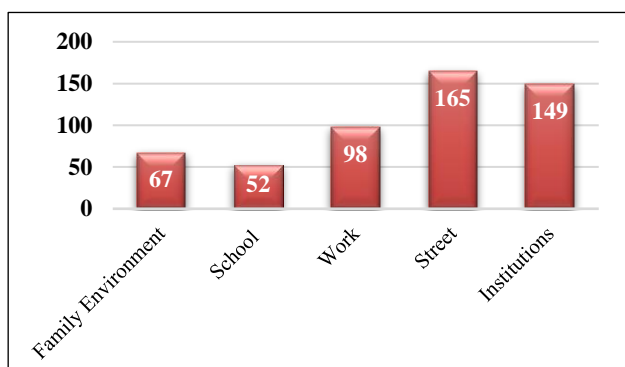


Figure 6: Mother's attitude towards environment of child sexual abuse.

Only 44(23.7%) of the 186 mothers studied have taught regarding good touch and bad touch to their children. While 33.3% of the mothers said they would teach their children in future, majority of the mothers 43.0% said that they will not teach regarding good touch and bad touch to their children (Figure 7). Of the 44 mothers who have taught regarding good touch and bad touch to their children, only 2(4.5%) taught about it to their male children. Of the 80 mothers who said they would teach their children in future only 7(8.8%) said they would teach regarding it to their male children.

The percentage of mothers believing in various approaches to reduce child sexual abuse is shown in Table 6.

As shown in Figure 8, 50.5% of the mothers believed that the major role in preventing child sexual abuse is played by the parents followed by law enforcement (18.8%), teachers (15.1%), Non-government organizations (12.9%) and children (2.7%).

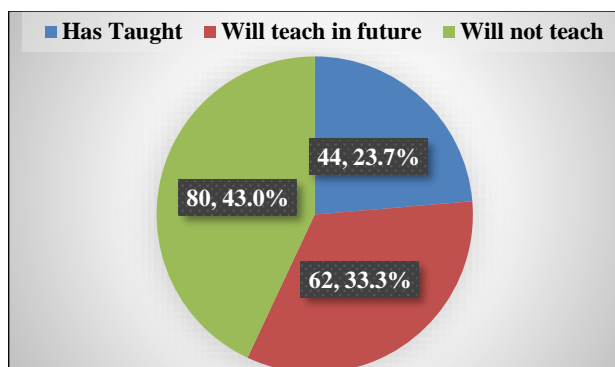


Figure 7: Mothers teaching about good touch and bad touch to their children.

Table 6: Approach to reducing child sexual abuse.

Approach to reducing child sexual abuse	Mothers believing in the approach (n = 186)
Stricter Legislature	165(88.7%)
Sex Education and awareness to children	97(52.2%)
Training for Teachers	102(54.8%)
Improving parental awareness	154(82.8%)
Confidential helplines for victims and parents	104(55.9%)
Ensuring child safety by parents and teachers	146(78.5%)

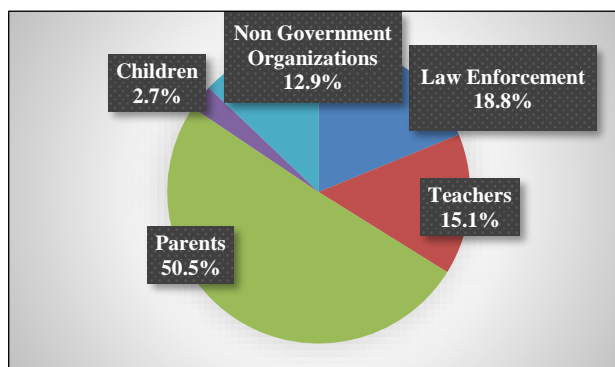


Figure 8: Major role in preventing child sexual abuse.

DISCUSSION

WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention (1999) formulated the definition of child sexual abuse which stated that "Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society".⁶ There has been a gross unrecognition and under reporting of child sexual abuse in India due to several factors such as fear of indignity, guilt, denial from the community, associated socio-cultural stigma, not being able to trust government bodies, and a gap in

communication between parents and children about this issue.⁷

In the Study on Child Abuse: India (2007) report by Ministry of Women and Child Development – Government India in which 12447 children across 13 states participated, 53.22% children reported having faced one of more forms of sexual abuse. 21.90% child respondents facing severe forms of sexual abuse and 50.76% other forms of sexual abuse. Out of the children respondents, 5.69% reported being sexually assaulted.¹ As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, crimes against children in India increased from 94,172 in 2015 to 1,06,958 in 2016, and 1,29,032 in 2017.⁸ This rise in number could be due to increasing awareness of crimes against children and more people reporting it.

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 provides legal framework for the protection of children from offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography, and to safeguard the child's interest during the judicial process. The act was further amended in 2019 to provide more stringent punishments for sexual offences against children.²⁻⁵ In this study, only 24 mothers out of the 186 mothers (12.9%) were aware of the POCSO Act. Of these 24 mothers, only 2(8.4%) were home makers. The majority who were aware of the act were in professions like healthcare, legal profession and teachers who were likely to have come across the act in professional capacity. This shows more awareness regarding the legal aspects of child sexual abuse is required among general public. Awareness of the details of the act will enable more victims and parents to come forward to seek legal help.

As per the POSCO act, it is mandatory to report cases sexual abuse against children. An easy step which can be taken by a person coming across a case of child sexual abuse in India is calling the 24 hours toll free emergency child helpline at 1098.⁵ Child sexual abuse victims can also call the helpline to seek help. Only 32.8% of the mothers in this study were aware of the child helpline facility. More awareness of this important initiative is required to improve reporting of such crimes and protect children in India.

The state of Tamil Nadu had 1,587 POSCO cases registered in 2017.⁸ While this number reflects only the registered cases, the true incidence is likely to be higher due to under reporting. On a study by Kumar MT et al, done in Kerala (2019), one year prevalence of sexual abuse was 16.7% and lifetime prevalence was 19.9%.⁹ In another study on prevalence of child abuse in school environment in Kerala by Kumar MT et al, (2019) one year and lifetime prevalence of child sexual abuse in school environment was 21.0% and 23.8%.¹⁰ In this study, majority of the participating mothers underestimated the number of child sexual abuse cases per year in Tamil Nadu with only 16.1% estimating more than 1500 cases per year indicating that there is ignorance

regarding the true prevalence of child sexual abuse among the mothers.

In this study only 25.3% of the mothers believed that boys could also be sexually abused. Also, only a small percentage of mothers taught or were willing to reach regarding good touch and bad touch to their boy children. Save the Children, the international organization, and, Tulir-Center for Healing and Prevention of Child Sex Abuse, an Indian NGO, conducted a study in 2005 among 2,211 school going children in Chennai, Tamil Nadu in which about 48% and 39% of the boys and girls, respectively, reported as being sexually abused.¹¹ Boys reported more sexual abuse than girls in the studies on child sexual abuse in Kerala by Kumar MT et al.^{9,10} Lack of awareness of the mothers regarding child sexual abuse in boys could lead to parents not suspecting and not recognizing indicators of sexual abuse in boys. The increased prevalence of child sexual abuse in boys could be partly due to the widespread idea among parents and guardians that only female children could be sexually abused and thereby failing to protect boys against sexual abuse. These findings in this study shows need for more awareness to be created at social level regarding child sexual abuse in boys.

Child sexual abuse leads to several immediate and long term physical, psychological and social consequences for the affected child. It is known to interfere with growth and development. Child sexual abuse has been linked to numerous maladaptive health behaviors, and poor social, mental and physical health outcomes throughout the lifespan.⁷ Serotonin abnormalities have been reported in various studies among participants exposed to child sexual abuse. Structures such as the prefrontal cortex, superior temporal gyrus, corpus callosum, parietal lobes, hippocampus, and cerebellum were found to demonstrate volumetric and structural changes in response to the trauma of child sexual abuse. Neurocognitive studies have demonstrated decrements in general cognitive performance and memory in child sexual abuse victims when compared to normal individuals.¹² Significant association between child sexual abuse and anxiety disorder, depression, eating disorders, PTSD, sleep disorders, and suicidal attempts but not with schizophrenia or somatoform disorders has been demonstrated by several studies.¹³

As per studies by Kumar MT et al, at Kerala, various factors that significantly increase the likelihood of child abuse were male gender, low socioeconomic status, nuclear families, regular use of alcohol and drugs by family member at home, and having other difficulties at school.^{9,10} 88.7% of the participating mothers in this study believed that unaccompanied children was a risk factor. 88.2% of the mother believed that physical and mental disability in children was a risk factor.

As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data on crimes in 2017, 93.6% cases of aggravated penetrative

sexual assault on children, the perpetrator was known to the victim. The most common perpetrators were family members, friends, neighbors and other known persons.⁸ But in this study, 75.3% of the mothers believed that the offenders were usually unknown persons. Only 36.0% and 27.9% of the mothers believed that child sexual abuse happens in family environment and school environment respectively.

A multi centric and an integrated approach for control and prevention of child sexual abuse was suggested by Singh MM et al.¹¹ This includes education, awareness, helpline, implementation of laws and policies, self-defense, identification and punishment of perpetrator, support for victims, training of professionals and medicolegal services. Choudhary V et al, conducted a qualitative study on Perspectives of Children, Caregivers, and Professionals on the impact of child sexual abuse and recommended multidimensional impact assessment, culturally sensitive assessment and intervention protocols, incorporation of family focused approach and multidisciplinary team approach to ensure the holistic wellbeing of children.¹⁴ In this study, 50.5% of the mothers believed that parents play the major role in preventing child sexual abuse. Stricter Legislature (88.7%) and improving parental awareness (82.8%) were the approaches to prevent child sexual abuse believed by majority of the participants in this study.

The findings of this study show that the awareness regarding various aspects of child sexual abuse was low among mothers of primary school children at Tamil Nadu, India. There is a definite lacuna in mother's knowledge regarding child sexual abuse. This indicates the need for more awareness programs to be conducted among mothers by schools, healthcare providers, social activists, NGOs, print medias, visual medias and social medias. Improving awareness among mothers regarding child sexual abuse would safeguard the interests of children.

CONCLUSION

The awareness regarding child sexual abuse was low among the mothers of primary school children who participated in this study. In addition to strengthening of legislature, more awareness regarding child sexual abuse among general public and special training of professionals dealing with children such as teachers and healthcare professionals will help to curb this important childhood social issue. Further a safe and confidential space for children, parents and guardians to report such offenses without fear of being exposed will help in more reporting of such crimes and help to punish the offenders and protect children.

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