

Research Article

Prevalence of child abuse in eastern India: a tip of iceberg

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Received: 02 August 2015

Revised: 08 August 2015

Accepted: 20 August 2015

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is a large child population in India and a large percentage of this population is vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and neglect. There is also inadequate information about the extent of child abuse in the country. Barring a few sporadic studies, with limited scope, the attempt to understand the different forms and magnitude of child abuse across the country has been inadequate.

Methods: Keeping in mind the sensitivity of the issue, child friendly tools and techniques were used to create an enabling environment for children to respond with ease and share their experiences on different forms of child abuse. The tools and techniques used were One-to-one interaction with children & Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Results: 61.69% of respondents report of having physical abuse, 17.17% report one of the major form of sexual abuse, whereas 55.22% faced one of the other form of sexual abuse. 30.85% of children faced emotional abuse and 61.17% of girl child report of gender bias in the family.

Conclusions: This study has thrown up information on the extent and magnitude of child abuse and girl child neglect. The study has established beyond doubt that child abuse exists in India and the incidence is much higher than generally perceived.

Keywords: Emotional abuse, Neglect, Physical abuse, Sexual abuse

INTRODUCTION

India is home to almost 19 percent of the world's children.¹ More than one third of the country's population, around 440 million, is below 18 years. According to one assumption 40 percent of these children are in need of care and protection, which indicates the extent of the problem. If child abuse is not the most serious crime facing our society today, it is certainly one of the most heart-wrenching.² Child abuse is shrouded in secrecy and there is a conspiracy of silence around the entire subject. In fact there is a well-entrenched belief that there is no child abuse in India and certainly there is no sexual abuse in the country. Further, certain kinds of

traditional practices that are accepted across the country, knowingly or un-knowingly amount to child abuse. Existing socio-economic conditions also render some children vulnerable and more at risk to abuse, exploitation and neglect. It is about time that we recognize this and take remedial measures. In many cases children are the victims of more than one type of abuse.³ Lack of empirical evidence and qualitative information on the dimensions of child abuse and neglect makes it difficult to address the issue in a comprehensive manner.

METHODS

Our studies on child abuse conducted in this region have been designed with the important purpose of providing

data to adequately reflect the situation. It was a descriptive type of study with cross section variant. After taking proper written consent from head of the institution and from the respective guardian and informed consent from the children data was collected from 404 children after one-to-one interaction with children & Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Child respondents included the following four categories of children:

- (a) Children in family environment, not attending school
- (b) Children in schools
- (c) Working children
- (d) Street children

RESULTS

Analysis of incidence of physical abuse among different age groups of child respondents revealed that 61.69% of respondents reports physical abuse. Majority of the abuser were one of the parents (86.69%) & rest by others related to the child. 61.44% of children is punished by teacher in the school. 44.53 % OF STUDENTS IS teased by dada student. Figure 1 shows the incidence of various types of abuse.

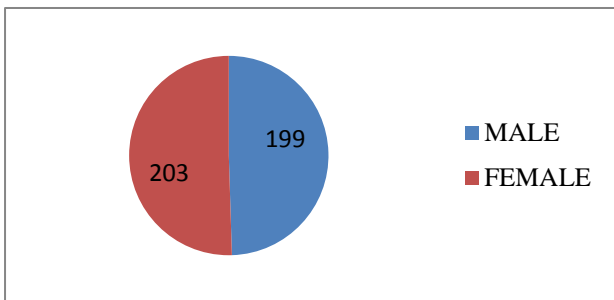


Figure 1: The incidence of various types of abuse.

There is a conspiracy of silence around the subject and a very large percentage of people feel that this is a largely western problem and that child sexual abuse does not happen in India. In our study it was found that 17.41 % reporting major sexual abuse & 55.22 % reporting other form of sexual abuse (Table-1). An incidence of major form of sexual abuse is more in the age range of 12-16 yrs.

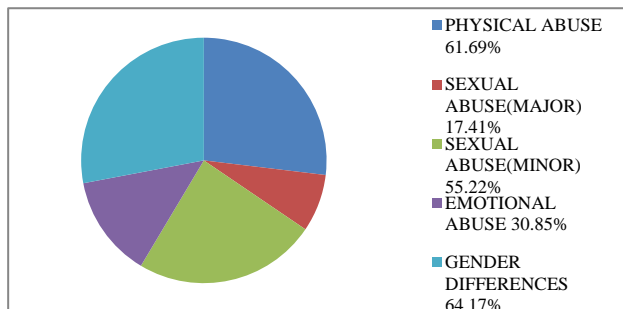


Figure 2: Distribution of the respondents according to sex.

Emotional and psychological maltreatment of children is the most complex type of abuse - invisible and difficult to define. Out of the total child respondents (402), 30.85 % children reported emotional abuse of one form or the other. 61.47 % of respondents feeling gender differences in the family.

Table 1: Incidences of various types of abuse.

Physical abuse	Sexual abuse (major form)	Sexual abuse (other form)	Emotional abuse	Gender differences
61.69%	17.17%	55.22%	30.85%	64.17%

Child abuse is one of the major problems affecting children today. It causes more physical & psychological morbidity than does most pediatric illness. Incidences of child abuse are referred to in literature as around second century AD.

Kempe and colleagues in 1962 coined the term battered baby syndrome. Nowadays the simple term child abuse is preferred.⁴ This covers not only physical abuse, but also sexual, emotional abuse and neglect. However, in India, as in many other countries, there has been no understanding of the extent, magnitude and trends of the problem.

There is very little research on physical abuse in India. A study of Physical and Sexual Abuse and Behavioural Problems amongst boys in a Child Observation Home in Delhi was conducted by Dr. Deepti Pagare, of Community Medicine, Maulana Azad Medical College, New Delhi, as part of her doctoral dissertation. The study revealed the following:⁵

1. About three-fourth (76.7%) of subjects reported physical abuse.
2. On clinical examination, among the physically abused children (n=145) physical signs were seen in 49.7% and behavioural signs in 22.8%.
3. The most common perpetrators of physical abuse were fathers (55.2%) followed by policemen (29.7%).
4. Physical abuse was found to be significantly associated with domestic violence, substance use in family, step parent, substance use by child, running away from home and working status.

A research study in West Bengal conducted by Save the Children and Tulir in 2006 among child domestic workers revealed that:⁶

1. Almost 70% of the child domestic workers had been physically abused.
2. In 41.5% cases the abuser was from the employers' family.
3. 46.6% of the children had faced severe abuse that left them with bodily injuries of which 25.3% reported

that they were cut or bruised as a result of the violence.

4. About 25% of the child domestic workers reported that the abuse was still happening with them.

The above findings are both disturbing and indicative of what is happening in Indian families and society. A study on Child Sexual Abuse carried out by Save the Children and Tulir in 2006 looked at the prevalence and dynamics of child sexual abuse among school going children in Chennai. The major findings of this study include:⁶

Out of the total of 2211 respondents, 42% children faced at least one form of sexual abuse or the other.

Among respondents, 48% of boys and 39% of the girls faced sexual abuse. The shame, secrecy and denial associated with familial sexual violence against children foster a pervasive culture of silence, where children cannot speak about sexual violence in the home, and where adults do not know what to do or say if they suspect someone they know is sexually abusing a child.¹³

The recent UN Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children has also highlighted the difficulties in defining emotional abuse. The Study says "Standard definitions are lacking, and little is known about the global extent of this form of violence against children except that it frequently accompanies other forms of abuse.⁷ For example, a strong coexistence between psychological and physical violence against children in violent households has been established. As quoted in the UN Study on Violence against Children, psychological forms of punishment are common.

A research study conducted by Tulir and Save the Children among Child Domestic Workers of West Bengal also gathered data on emotional abuse.⁶ The study reported that the "problem of emotional abuse of child domestic workers seems to be near universal in character, with 441 out of a total of 513 participants saying that they have faced emotional abuse.

CONCLUSION

Independent India has taken large strides in addressing issues like child education, health and development. However, child protection has remained largely unaddressed. There is now a realization that if issues of child abuse are not addressed, it will affect the overall progress of the country. This study has thrown up information on the extent and magnitude of child abuse and girl child neglect. This has established beyond doubt that child abuse exists in India and the incidence is much higher than generally perceived.

Funding: No funding sources

Conflict of interest: None declared

Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee

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Cite this article as: Bala D, Maji B, Satapathy J, Routray RK. Prevalence of child abuse in eastern India: a tip of iceberg. Int J Contemp Pediatr 2015;2:353-5.