



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SRI LANKA; A COMPARATIVE FACTOR IDENTIFICATION ON CHILD AND CHILD ABUSE CONVICTS' SOCIAL BACKGROUND

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ABSTRACT

According to the NCPA Report, there were 9673 in 2023 reported child abuse cases. The objective of this paper is to discuss the biopsychosocial consequences of child abuse and suggest the basic components of social support network programs to mitigate child abuse in Sri Lanka. This research is a comparative, descriptive study of child abuse in Sri Lanka. The study focused on analyzing related background factors of both sides' those children and the child abuse perpetrators. The research problem was to explore the risk factors and root factors that influence child abuse from both sides' children and the perpetrators. The research was conducted with secondary and primary data. Background factors related to the abused child were revealed through randomly selected scholarly research articles. Perpetrators' background was analyzed with primary data which was collected from semi-structured interviews of ten cases convicted for child abuse in the prison. The social background of child abuse is highly related to reasons such as lower educational levels of both the child and the parents, low awareness of sexuality and child rights related to sexual and other types of abuse, insecurity family situation with poverty, drunken fathers, parents' marriage mismatches and casual marriage relationships, and cultural acceptances and customs. Biopsychosocial symptoms of sexual child abuse can be identified from rape to death with kissing, touching of genital areas and organs, oral sex, showing and taking pictures of sexual images, and habitual sexual intercourse at home with close relatives. Most common child abuse perpetrators are biological fathers, stepfathers, school teachers, close relatives such as sisters' husbands or uncles, father's friends, or close neighbors. Most perpetrators had negative childhood experiences, low education levels, low parental care, illicit drug use, and excessive sexual desire. According to the underpinned theory; there is a correlation between lack of education and committing crimes. Expanding educational opportunities within the reach of every citizen, taking actions to prevent dropout, and making school a pleasant place for students must be done. Social support networks for mitigating child abuse should be focused on addressing risk factors including family, child, youth, and reputation of all groups and interference of government and volunteer agencies.

KEY WORDS: Biopsychosocial Symptoms, Child abuse, Child Abuse Perpetrators, Child Protection Social Support Network, Risk Factors

INTRODUCTION

Children are the most vulnerable and deserted group in every society. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, all persons under the age of 18 are children, unless the child does not come of age earlier, according to the laws covering the child. Every child has a right to live without any hesitation. Children must be protected from any hazards. Children must have education access. They need good hygiene facilities. They need self-dignity, love, and care.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) negatively influences the wealth and comfort of a child and affects society's standards & social ideals. Child abuse and neglect are the most significant factors that should be focused on to start social discourse from the general to the judiciary in Sri Lanka. Hence, evidence shows that child abuse can be prevented, and it is an essential target under 16.2 of the Sustainable Development for 2030. It is also the responsibility of the particular government and international agencies who are concerned about child rights. Children's rights in the UNCRC are divided into three groups of Ps, which are provision, protection, and participation.

Sex acts that involve touching the child's breasts, or genitals, making a child touch the perpetrator's breasts or genitals, voyeurism (that is, when a perpetrator looks at a child's naked body), exhibitionism (that is, when a perpetrator shows a child his or her naked body) (Workin & Martyniuk, 2011). CSA can be hurt physically and psychologically. Child abuse can be mainly categorized as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. 'Physical abuse is defined as hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating, or otherwise causing physical harm to the child' (Beckett, 2007). Childhood sexual abuse causes learning issues, phobia, anxiety, depression, attempts at suicide, etc.

The National Child Protection Authority, the Department of Probation and Childcare Services, The National Monitoring Committee on CRC, and The Secretariat on ECCD are the four main sectors that work under the Management of the Ministry. They are the actors who are responsible for fulfilling Child rights and protection in Sri Lanka. According to the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) of Sri Lanka, there were 9673 reported child abuse cases in 2023. There are cruelties (2238), grave sexual abuses (408), grievous hurts (266), sexual harassment (469), cause hurts (166), neglect of children, and cruelties (383) among them. There are 39 child marriages, 46 domestic violence, 03 abortions, and 53 teenage pregnancies. In addition to that, 454 children were considered a group that needed psychological social support (NCPA, 2023).

Below mentioned table shows direct admissions of convicted prisoners for child abuse

Table 01: Direct Admissions of Convicted Prisoners by Type of Offence: Child Abuse 2021 -2023

Type	2021	2022	2023
Cruelty to children	03	03	22
Sexual abuse of children	18	26	329
Inducement and involvement of children to beggar	10		03
Having sexual intercourse with children	07	177	36
Involvement of children in sexual activities and procurement of children for same		02	
Unnatural offences	02	07	21
Act of gross indecency	-	03	02
Procuration	-	07	04
Sale of children	-	01	-
Rape of a girl	14	44	2
Child abuse Total	54	270	443

Source: Department of Prison, 2024

There are numerous background factors behind this issue as family situation, parental migration, and seasonal variations (De Silva et al., 2022). Victims are mainly female and older than 12 years, with most perpetrators being male and known to the child (Rohana Chandra et al., 2021). Perpetrators are mostly parents, guardians or caregivers, close relatives, peers, neighbors or strangers. Violence against children can occur in numerous places including homes, neighbors' homes, kindergartens, schools, orphanages, the streets, workplaces, or public places. It is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or have been neglected in the past year in the world (WHO, 2022). On the other side, there is a significant trend of criminal attendance in Sri Lanka now. It can be seen with criminals against women and girls such as rape over 18 years old over (113), sexual harassment (89), and child abuse (85) are reported rapidly (Prison Statistics, 2024).

Table 02: Direct Admissions of Convicted Prisoners: Criminal Offences Against Persons (Selected High Rate of Offences from The Main Table) in 2023

Type of Offence	2023
Murder (sentenced to death)	99
Attempted murder	79
Rape: rape of women over 18 years of age	113
rape of women under 18 years of age	85
rape of a mentally or physically handicapped woman	06
gang rape	07
Grievous hurt	79
Simple hurt	133
Causing grievous injury by reckless driving	149
Sexual harassment	89

Source: Department of Prison, 2024

According to scholarly articles, there are main concepts related to this issue as violence, domestic violence, child abuse, childcare, perpetrators' psychosocial experiences, and awareness of sexuality and public law against child abuse. Child abuse is one of the crucial forms of violence. Child abuse is committed by an adult against a person under the age of 18. It ranges from neglect, shaking, beating, sexual trafficking, labor trafficking, and homicides of a child. This can affect a child's normal development including their mental, physical, and social well-being (Sarawad, 2022).

Many researchers and scholars paid attention to revealing child abuse and its consequences. The significant risk factor of this is abuse for any category including children or women makes an imbalance in their lifelong. It affects individual, group, community, and societal levels' interrelationships. They lost their childhood as well as adulthood. Abusive mothers have lower self-esteem, less social support, and more negative feelings toward their fathers compared to non-abusive mothers (Oates & Forrest, 1985). When it comes to holistic understanding; it affects the entire family. Therefore, if society needs to mitigate this situation concerns on home visits, early intervention programs and referrals for education should be explored (Tenney-Soeiro & Wilson, 2004). For primary prevention to be successful, when it be implemented at many levels. Parents need support in their role of parenting, treat parents who abuse alcohol or drugs, need awareness on time management, budgeting skills, and stress management. Among those strategies are increasing the value of children, increasing the economic self-sufficiency of families, discouraging corporal punishment and other forms of violence, making health care more accessible and affordable, and expanding and improving the coordination of social services. is included (Bethea, 1996).

Research Problem

The study focused on analyzing related background factors of both sides' those children and the child abuse perpetrators.

What are the background social factors that affect child abuse on both sides the child and the child abuse perpetrators?

Objectives,

The objective of this paper is to discuss the biopsychosocial consequences of child sexual abuse and suggest the basic components of social support network programs to mitigate child sexual abuse in Sri Lanka.

Methods and Materials:

This research is a comparative, descriptive study of child abuse in Sri Lanka. The study focused on analyzing related background factors of both sides' the child and the child abuse convicts. The study is underpinned by the cognitive theory of crime introduced by Charles Goring (1870-1919). He showed that crime could be explained by examining the physical and psychological differences between those convicted of a crime and those who

had not. According to him, these differences could be fixed by addressing education, removing opportunities to commit crimes, and restricting the reproductive rights of people with inheritable tendencies toward crime. Research was conducted using secondary and primary data and quantitative and qualitative data. Background factors related to the abused child were revealed through randomly selected scholarly research articles. Perpetrators' background was analyzed with primary data which was collected from semi-structured interviews of ten cases who convicted for child abuse in the prison.

Findings and Discussion:

Child abuse perpetrators' social life:

- Most of the child abuse perpetrators had grown up without their mothers. They had grown up with close relatives such as grandparents, aunts, etc. They had just fulfilled their basic needs such as meals and health only. Those child abuse perpetrators had not built-up emotional bonds with their parents or caregivers. Child perpetrators who grew up with parents also had poor parenting practices. Their parents also had low education levels. These perpetrators who lived with their relatives had worked for them in paddy fields and in their home premises. Their childhood experiences are so sad and sometimes very hard. They had experienced harsh life experiences with low life expectancies.
- Most of these people had only attended school up to a maximum of grade eight. Many of them cannot read and write. Many of them can write their name only. Their parents and siblings also had this type of low education level. Most of them had associated with older people, not peers at their school age. In those associations, they had been addicted to using illicit alcohol and watching nude pictures. These abusers have kinky libidos. Most of them had sexual relations with women other than a prostitute or their married wife at least once in their lives.

Table 03: Direct Admissions of Convicted Prisoners According to Level of Education 2019-2023

Level of Education	2021	%	2022	%	2023	%
No schooling	275	02	836	03	2569	05
Grade1- 5	2019	14	4671	15	4072	09
Passed Grade 5	2679	18	6747	22	7171	15
Passed Grade 8	3778	26	7168	24	15646	33
Passed G.C.E O/L	4447	31	8420	28	11658	25
Passed G.C.E A/L	1257	09	2340	08	5716	12
Graduate	87	01	121	-	66	-
Others	05	-	28	-	41	-
Total	14547	100	30331	100	46939	100

Source: Department of Prison, 2024

5% of the students have never attended school. 9% of them learnt up to grade five. 62% of the students have received school education only up to grade eight. This is evidence that the last decade has seen an increase in school dropouts. (The discussion (2016) with the prisoners who were sentenced to death is proof of that. According to that research data, the education level of convicted prisoners was 40% representatives were learnt to grade five. 30% for below grade eight and 30% for below grade ten and its representation (Subasinghe, 2016).

- Some of the perpetrators had developed sexual relationships with girls of fourteen or fifteen years of age and brought them to their homes at their young age. Family life with the girl had been done at an early age. Some have married a specific girl after the child reaches 18 years of age. However, they were considered child abuse perpetrators because they were over 18 at that time.
- Older men had abused children in situations where the children had lost parental care. They had done it habitually. Some were people who worked together with the father of those children. Some were close relatives. They were not strangers and they knew each other.
- Most of the abusers had done wage labor as their occupation in paddy works and other unskilled working fields. Most abusers were poor. They didn't have permanent jobs. They had done daily wage work. Among them, brick cutting, mining, helping hands in house building, and Stealing were special.
- Most of these people had been married several times in their lives or had sex with different women. Many of these abusers had failed in marriages with divorces or separation. Those women had often gone to work abroad or had got another marriage. Most of them had complicated marriage experiences.

Abused child's social life:

- Children are sexually abused by people close to them who know them well. Among them are biological fathers, grandfathers, uncles, men from the neighborhood, teachers, etc. (Hettiarachchi, 2020).
- Unsafe home: Parents are unable to provide protection and safety to their children due to a lack of social support systems and accessible and affordable assistance. poverty, lack of education, parental neglect, and separated families. (Shashika & Silva, 2020)
- Dysfunctional home environments such as fractured families, parent/s employed abroad, substance abuse among family members, and Children without adult supervision (Management of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2014).

Conclusion

The social background of abused children was also in an unsafe condition. One of the main characteristics that could be seen in the lives of abused girls was that they were less

secure. The majority of these children dropped out of school at an early age. Children who did not receive proper parental care, especially in rural families faced this unfortunate situation. When female children who have reached puberty are intimately associated with older men, they become sexually involved with the consent of those girls. The abusers stated that these girls then demanded to take them away. Girls' sexual knowledge and their lack of knowledge and attitude about social responsibility and role could be considered as some underlying factors. The lack of knowledge of the citizens about the law was another important factor in the increase of such crimes. Child abusers all knew that child abuse was a punishable offense. However, they did not have a clear idea about the method of punishing the crime or the seriousness of the process. They did not know that abusing children i.e. girls or boys below the age of 18 years is an anti-social act that will lead to jail time. Perhaps it was known but ignored. But they didn't know or had ignored that one day they would be punished by the law.

The study revealed that there was a complex social background pattern of child abusers' life history. There were different types of child abuse as one's own child abuse, close relatives' child abuse, neighbor child abuse, and stranger child abuse. Several risk factor characteristics of child abuse perpetrators could be identified. It could be summarized as perpetrators' childhood experience, social interrelationships, lack of opportunities and encouragement to get an education, economic background, and lack of awareness about the child abuse law in the community. Family background was important in determining the risk of becoming a child abuser and was intertwined with economic factors and issues related to sexual behaviors. Poor childcare and parent care relationships, frustration, socioeconomic conditions, and alcoholism were other main factors behind this behavior.

According to the underpinned theory; there is a correlation between less education level and committing crimes. The citizens become less aware of their social responsibilities and they lose their cognitive skills to understand the bad impacts to society that can occur due to their bad habits and behaviors. They become less aware of the emotional and medical consequences of unhealthy sexual relationships.

Recommendations:

The study recommends tailored interventions to mitigate the issue. Expanding educational opportunities within the reach of every citizen, taking actions to prevent dropout, and making school a pleasant place for students must be done. It is required to give scientific knowledge about reproductive and sexual information to the students. Furthermore, it is recommended to introduce an app that can be reached by the children easily to inform the responsible bodies about any kind of child abuse or risk factors of child abuse which has been affected to them. All members of the society should know that the preservation of socio-cultural values is the responsibility of every citizen and it is essential for social well-being. The media needed to play an important role in giving the current message of sexual abuse and its consequences to the public. It should be

understood that eliminating opportunities to commit crimes in society is **police** and judicial as well as a community responsibility.

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