

Child Sexual Abuse – Social Workers’ Perspective

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Abstract

One of the gravest forms of violence that any child can be a victim of is Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) which is a universal problem. The perpetual effects of Child Sexual Abuse are hard to even comprehend. The children who are sexually abused often suffer physically, psychologically, emotionally, and socially, most times unable to recover from the trauma for long periods of time. The chances of adult psychiatric disorders are relatively high with individuals who have gone through sexual abuse as children, depending on the level of trauma it has caused. The help to be extended to those affected legally, socially, and emotionally are not equal because of the level of awareness, perceptions, and understanding about CSA and practices related to it. Social workers ought to act instrumental in promoting the justice of the vulnerable by mitigating its incidence. Through this descriptive study, the researchers have brought to light the level of knowledge, attitudes, and practices of Social workers about Child Sexual Abuse and has suggested appropriate social work intervention measures to combat Child Sexual Abuse.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, child, children, social work.

Introduction:

World Health Organization defines Child Sexual Abuse as the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend and is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society^[1]. In India, children are easily prone to various forms of abuse ranging from physical, and emotional to sexual through rape, trafficking, drug abuse, and forced prostitution. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is one of the severest forms of child abuse,

which causes physical, mental, and emotional problems which affect them in devastating and irreversible ways^[2]. National Crime Record Bureau report (2016) shows that a child is abused every 15 minutes, which is shocking information and denotes the health of society as a whole^[3]. NCRB data 2020 shows that 28.9 per cent of the total child population faces crimes of some form but only 65.6 per cent of total crime is reported^[4]. Child Sexual Abuse has thus become a high-priority social problem that needs addressing through various aspects. The abusers or perpetrators are relatives, neighbours, or someone in the close circle of the

child most of the time. NCRB Report 2020 shows that all over India, in 26,934 POCSO cases, the offenders were known to the victim; among which 2,556 were family members; 11,272 were family friends/neighbours/ employer or other known persons and 13,106 were friends/online friends or live in partners on the pretext of marriage. Child Sexual Abuse in India is at an alarming rate, yet there is a stigma attached to the topic which also causes the underreporting of the incidence^[5]. Also, there is no age bar set, the victims are hardly months old, which questions our societal morals.

The social work profession is associated with individuals, families, groups and communities in an effort to enhance social functioning and overall well-being. CSA happening at this pace in our country has become a potential cause for an increase in crime rate and disruption in harmony. One incident of Child sexual abuse, doesn't affect only the individual, nor does it affect the child only at that particular time, rather it affects the people around the child and puts the child in perpetual trauma. There is a grave need to sensitize on the matter, and assure justice is served.

Literature Review

Crimes against children are a concern which affects children worldwide. India is home to over 19 per cent of the world's children who form 42 per cent of the nation's population. It is alarming that crime against children has risen by 16.2 per cent between 2020 and 2021. The decade 2011-2021 showed a shocking increase in crime against children and a third (36.1%) of the crimes registered were under the POCSO

Act of 2012^[6].

A study on Child Abuse in India in 2007 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development Government of India showed that 53.22 per cent of children reported having faced one or more forms of sexual abuse. 21.90 per cent of child respondents reported facing severe forms of sexual abuse and 50.76 per cent other forms of sexual abuse^[7]. Children on street, children at work and children in institutional care reported the highest incidence of sexual assault. 50 per cent of abuses are persons known to the child or in a position of trust and responsibility and most of them did not even report it to anyone. This also shows that sexual crimes often carry the risk of underreporting due to associated stigmas, the actual incidence of the crime may be even higher than reported^[8].

Awareness and Perceptions about Child Sexual Abuse among Young Adults in India - A Research Study (2017) supported by TATA Trusts says the chances of reporting sexual abuse experience increase with age and education^[9]. In three-fifths (62%) of the cases of those who reported, no legal nor non-legal action was taken. Legal action was taken in only seven per cent of cases of sexual abuse that were reported.

Sexual abuse affects the child both physically as well as psychologically. A study done by Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation found that survivors of CSA lack confidence, fear going out alone, sense a change in the behaviour of family members and in case of children above 15 years of age ten to blame or harm themselves^[9]. The trauma associated with Child Sexual Abuse can cause arrested development and psychosocial and behavioural

problems throughout their life. Sexual abuse at such early age could lead to psychiatric disorders in adulthood, developmental delays, memory lapses, inability to control anxiety and violent outbursts. Sexually abused children feel unloved which shows how the family itself can infuse long-term adverse impacts on survivors' self-esteem and confidence. Thus the affected children need therapy and early intervention that could mitigate the aftermath^[10].

An Epidemiological Overview of Child Sexual Abuse (2014, Mannat Mohanjeet Singh et al) pictures CSA to be an extensive problem and even the lowest prevalence includes a huge number of victims^[11]. Three main issues have been identified that make it difficult to estimate exactly how many children are victims of CSA. Firstly, the way abuse is defined plays an important role. Secondly, the cases reported by the official organizations usually underrate the number of victims as many cases never get reported to them. Thirdly, different studies report the prevalence for different time periods.

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 has brought about child-friendly procedures for reporting, recording of evidences, investigation and trial of offences. POCSO defines children to be below 18 years of age and talks about safe and unsafe touch. Even the attempt to commit the offence is liable for up to half the punishment. If the offence is heinous, the burden of proof is shifted to the Accused^[12].

Breaking the Silence - Child Sexual Abuse in India (2013) by Human Rights Watch says a major problem in India is the lack of effective monitoring of residential care facilities, orphanages and other children's

institutions^[13]. In the first half of 2012 alone, the Times of India newspaper reported sexual abuse cases in eight different residential facilities in different parts of the country. Child sexual abuse in India, though widespread, is difficult to document because it is shrouded in secrecy. Fear of social stigma, an unwillingness to implicate family members, and other factors discourage families from exposing abuse. Police misbehaviour and a long judicial process are deterrents to seeking redress. Children's complaints are often dismissed not just by family members or persons in positions of authority, but also by the police, medical staff, and others. Instead of compassion, victims may be re-traumatized by how they are treated once they make their abuse known.

A study on preferential treatment of children and children's rights, such as the right to life, protection, participation, and development, among male and female children, found that a significant portion of respondents (45.3%) had experienced sexual abuse. Among them, 30% of respondents disclosed that their friends and peers are the highest perpetrators of sexual abuse, and 12% of respondents disclosed parental sexual abuse. The study revealed that school-going children were victims of sexual abuses which were unheard^[14].

Methodology

The role of social workers in the deep-rooted problem of Child Sexual Abuse in India is very essential, from sensitizing the parents, teachers, and children in being aware of how to spot, report and handle the post-incidence with the children. The descriptive study has aimed to capture the awareness, opinion and practices of Social workers in Tamil Nadu towards the

prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse.

Objectives:

- To study the socio-demographic profile of the respondents
- To assess the knowledge, attitudes and practices of Social workers on Child Sexual Abuse
- To suggest appropriate social work intervention measures to combat the Child Sexual Abuse

Data collection and Sampling:

The data was collected quantitatively from 93 samples by using the convenient sampling method from the social workers of Tamil Nadu. The questionnaire tool consists of the demographic details such as age, experience and place they are associated with as social workers (urban, rural or semi-urban) from different backgrounds as students, academicians and practitioners and also the knowledge of the social worker about CSA, attitude towards CSA and how are their practices based on it.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The collected data was analyzed by using the objectives of the study and interpreted with the following tables and diagrams through the statistical software SPSS 20.0 version.

Note: Table 1 shows the mix of respondents who are social work students, practitioners and academicians. Predominantly the students pursuing social work degrees were more than half (62.4%) and one third were practitioners (33.3%) and only four per cent were

academicians.

Table 1

Type of Respondents

Type of respondents	Frequency	Percent
Social Work Student	58	62.4
Practitioner	31	33.3
Academician	4	4.3
Total	93	100.0

Table 2

Experience in Years

Experience in years	Frequency	Percent
Less than a year	33	35.5
Below 3 years	42	45.2
3 to 10 years	10	10.8
11 to 20 years	6	6.5
Above 20 years	2	2.2
Total	93	100.0

Note: The experience of the social workers is portrayed in table 2 with nearly half (45.2%) of the respondents having less than 3 years of experience and more than 8 per cent having more than 10 years of experience.

Chart 1

Place of Origin of Respondents

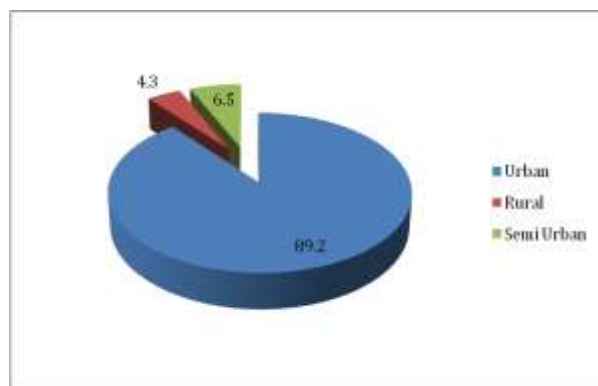


Table 3.0

CSA cases first-hand encounter

Encounter	Frequency	Percent
Yes	20	21.5
No	73	78.5
Total	93	100.0

Note: Majority (78.5%) of the respondents have not encountered Child Sexual Abuse first-hand and twenty-one per cent of them have had first-hand information about Child Sexual Abuse.

Table 3.1

Call for Action

Call for Action	Frequency	Percent
No Response	65	69.9
No	1	1.1
Not faced such a situation	1	1.1

Called and reported through CHILDLINE	7	7.5
Done more than one of the above, based on the need	6	6.5
Guided the parents/Guardian to file the case under POCSO	4	4.3
I have handled abused children in a psychiatric hospital	1	1.1
I interned with the Childline. I got to attend the case along with my supervisor.	1	1.1
Informed School Teacher	1	1.1
Psychoeducation to the family and counselling	1	1.1
Reported the case to the station myself	3	3.2
Tried to escape before it got worse and my parents wanted them	1	1.1
Warned him	1	1.1
Total	93	100.0

Note: The above tables 3.0 and 3.1 show the encounter of Social workers with CSA and their response to the same.

Chart 2

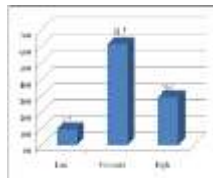


Chart 3

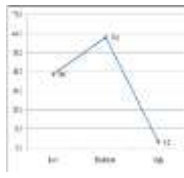
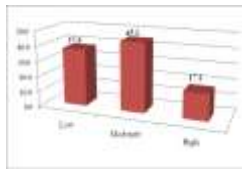


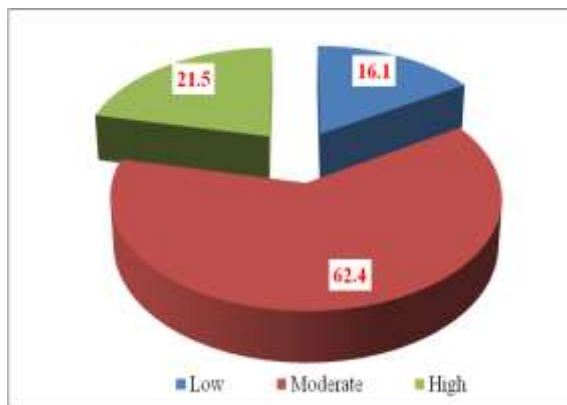
Chart 4



Note: The above charts depict the level of knowledge, attitude and practice about Child Sexual Abuse by Social Workers and it is found that the social workers are aware of and also intervened through various sources when a child was abused by the perpetrators.

Chart 5

Level of Awareness (KAP) of Social Workers about the Child Sexual Abuse



Note: From the above figure, it is found that more than half (62.4%) of the social workers were moderately aware of the abuses among children and just over one fifth (21.5%) of them were having a high level of knowledge, attitude and practice about the abuses that happened among the children and also made an effort to intervene the problem.

Findings of the Study

The following are the findings of the study

- 80 per cent of the respondents belong to the age group of 20-25 years.
- 66.7 per cent are female respondents
- 62 per cent are social work students, 33.3 per cent are social work practitioners and 4.3 per cent are academicians.
- More than one-fifth of the respondents have encountered at least one CSA case first-hand and acted on it.
- 44 per cent of the respondents believe that there will be no obvious evidence if the child has been sexually abused.
- 10 per cent of the respondents believe that females cannot sexually abuse children and 12 per cent believe that boys are not sexually abused.
- 96 per cent of the respondents feel that CSA prevention education in school is necessary.
- 97 per cent of the respondents feel that children should be taught about safe touch and unsafe touch.
- 95 per cent of the respondents encourage constructive candid conversation about CSA.
- 41 per cent of the respondents conveyed the essence of CSA's ill effects through folk arts.
- 69 per cent of the respondents told about CHILDLINE services with respect to CSA in the community/school they have visited.
- 55 per cent of the respondents have not read through POCSO Act, 2012.
- Majority (62.4%) of the social workers were moderately aware of the abuses among children and one fifth (21.5%) of them were having a high level of knowledge, attitude and practice about the

abuses that happened among the children and also made an effort to intervene in the problem.

Suggestions

Social workers should be appointed in every school to keep a check on the emotional, psychological, behavioural and sexual abuse problems faced by children in the school. The social workers should also hold sessions with the children on a regular basis to mitigate the abuses faced by them. As the opinion stands out through our findings, Child Sexual Abuse prevention education should be implemented in schools orienting the children and parents about the possible ways of being abused and how to act accordingly. The POCSO Act of 2012 mentions certain guidelines for the victims to take the assistance of experts which also includes social workers. These guidelines are the procedures to be carried out when a child is a victim of sexual abuse and should be incorporated into the social work curriculum along with social legislation. There should be more efforts by the NGOs and Government bodies at State, District and Block levels to create awareness about Child sexual Abuse. The findings also suggest the need for a Board of Social Workers that standardizes the procedures.

Social workers can also be part of the legal system and provide support to the victims as well as their families. Social workers can play a major role in ensuring that there is no re-victimisation occurring in the legal process and it is as child-friendly as possible. There is also a need for constant follow-up of the state of the victims to ensure that the child is able to lead life positively. The effects of child sexual abuse

may be short, medium or long-term and it depends on various factors. Social workers can plan interventions along with a multidisciplinary team to support the child. Child protection plans can also be formulated at the school level and the children can be trained with consideration of their best interest. Social workers can also assist the child in identifying the risk factors around them and how they can be dealt with. Social workers also have a key role in ensuring that the best interest of the child is taken into consideration at all stages.

Conclusion

Child Sexual Abuse is one of the severest forms of Child abuse that causes perpetual trauma that causes long-term effects on the child, mostly psychological. With the increasing incidence of Child Sexual Abuse irrespective of age and background, the study has brought about the Social Workers' perspective on Child sexual abuse. The social workers depict the need to increase awareness about CSA among parents, children and other institutions responsible for the safety of Children. The awareness on CSA needs to be strengthened at the school level as well as in families. The family is the first agent of socialisation for a child from where she/he learns about the world around them. The family can impart preliminary learnings in safe and unsafe touch, interacting with strangers etc. Schools should impart age-appropriate comprehensive sexual education to the students. Social workers should be appointed at the school level and they should ensure guidance to the children on the matter of CSA.

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