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# The Effect of Sexual Abuse on Social Adjustment on Street Children In Hyderabad City


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**ABSTRACT**

This study explained to the effect of sexual abuse on the social adjustment on street children in Hyderabad, India. The study participants, 75 boys and 75 girls, were randomlyselected from three rehabilitation homes in Hyderabad city. Data were collected using a Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) and the Social Adjustment Inventory.Findings revealed that boys were more often victims of physical abuse (20.7%) while girlswere more often victims of sexual abuse(25.1%). The social adjustment scores of streetchildren who experienced abuse was significantlylower when compared with scores of those who had not experienced abuse social adjustment and girls was poorer than that of the boys($p<0.001$).

**KEYWORDS** SexualAbuse, SocialAdjustment, StreetChildren, Hyderabad, India

**Introduction**

India is home to 430 million children, roughly one in five of all children (individuals under age 18) in the world. From the moment they are born, the challenges many of them face are staggering (seeThe Planning Commission, Government of India, 2012). At least 1.7 million children die before the age of five every year in India (UNCF, 2011). Malnutrition means that almost half of those that survive are stunted, and 43 percent are underweight (Ibid). The right to education is enshrined in the Indian constitution, (The Indian Constitution in Art, 2012) but, though the situation is improving, there were still 8.1 million out-of-school children in mid-2009(UNCF, 2012). The government estimates that 40 percent of India's children are vulnerable to threats such as trafficking, homelessness, forced labor, drug abuse, and crime, and are in need of protection (seeThe Planning Commission, Government of India, 2012). More than half of the country's married women were wed before the legal age of 18 (HAQ, 2011). Currently, only about 60 percent of births in India are even registered (Ibid).

In 2007 the government published its first ever survey to address what the then minister of women and child development, Renuka Chowdhury, described as the "conspiracy of silence" surrounding child sexual abuse (Ministry of Women and Child Development of India, 2012).The report uncovered some alarming statistics, though, as explained below, the report methodology was limited and the numbers should be taken more as an indication of the seriousness of the problem than a reflection of the actual incidence of abuse (Ibid). Of the children interviewed, more than half (53 percent) said that they had been subjected to one or more forms of sexual abuse. Over 20 percent of those interviewed said they were subjected to severe forms of abuse, defined in the report as "sexual assault, making the child fondle private parts, making the child exhibit private body parts and being photographed in the nude." Of those who said they were sexually abused, 57 percent were boys (Ibid).

The survey also found that very few cases are ever reported. The vast majority of victims (72 percent) said that they did not report the matter to anyone and only 3 percent of them or their families told the police. In most cases the perpetrator was known to the child. For example, 31 percent of sexual assaults were committed by the victim's uncle or neighbor. Among those interviewed, children living on the street, in institutions, or already working were more likely to be the victims of sexual assault than those living with their parents and attending school, but even wealthy families were affected. The government survey was based on interviews with 12,500 children in 13 different states and was one of the largest ever conducted in the world. However, many child protection experts have criticized the way it was carried out and even its authors admit that most of the respondents were from especially vulnerable backgrounds. For example, when researchers visited schools, they interviewed pupils who their teachers had already identified as being at risk from abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Thus, drawing broader conclusions about the percentages of all Indian children affected, given that no random sample of children was done, would be misleading. However, the survey does show that the problem is very significant and that the government is aware of it.

Other studies have shown the seriousness of the problem. In 1998 the Indian NGO Recovery and Healing from Incest (RAHI) conducted India's first study of child sexual abuse. It surveyed 600 English-speaking middle and upper-class women, 76 percent of whom said they had been abused in childhood or adolescence, 40 percent by at least one family member, most commonly an uncle or cousin (see Recovery and Healing from Incest, 1998).

Many children in South and Central Asia grow up feeling unsafe and insecure. At the same time more and more cases of child sexual abuse are surfacing. Until recently it was assumed that only a small number of children were sexually abused. It was believed that most abusers were strangers or adults in positions of responsibility and only in exceptional circumstances were parents. "Abusers" come from all social classes and groups and can be either male or female, but statistically men comprise the vast majority of those who sexually abuse children. Abusers may be parents, teachers, employers or religious leaders, members of criminal gangs and networks or people from law enforcement agencies. Child sexual abuse is defined as "the imposition of sexual acts, or acts with sexual overtones, by one or more persons on a child" (Save the Children, CSA Draft Policy) (Slugget, 2003).

India has the largest population of street children in the world (UNDP, 1993).At least eighteen million children live or work on the streets of urban India, laboring as porters at bus or rail-

way terminals; as mechanics in informal auto-repair shops; as vendors of food, tea, or handmade articles; as street tailors; or as ragpickers, picking through garbage and selling usable materials to local buyers (UNDP, 1996).Indian street children are routinely detained illegally, beaten and tortured and sometimes killed by police. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon: police perceptions of street children, widespread corruption and a culture of police violence, the inadequacy and non-implementation of legal safeguards, and the level of impunity that law enforcement officials enjoy. The police generally view street children as vagrants and criminals. While it is true that street children are sometimes involved in petty theft, drug trafficking, prostitution and other criminal activities, the police tend to assume that whenever a crime is committed on the street, street children are either involved themselves or know the culprit. Their proximity to a crime is considered reason enough to detain them. This abuse violates both Indian domestic law and international human rights standards.

Street children are also easy targets. They are young, small, poor, and ignorant of their rights and often have no family members who will come to their defense. It does not require much time or effort to detain and beat a child to extract a confession, and the children are unlikely to register formal complaints (Human Rights Watch, 1996).

Research indicates that child sexual abuse may produce immediate negative outcomes, as well as long-term sequelae (Browne &Finkelhor, 1986; Mullen *et al.*, 1994). During childhood, sexual abuse may cause emotional and behavioral problems. For example, depression is often manifested through self-mutilation and suicide attempts (De Luca *et al.*, 1992). Other studies that focused on sexually victimized girls found that low self-esteem, aggression, anxiety, sexual adjustment problems (De Luca *et al.*, 1995; Graystone*t al.*, 1992), and feelings of loneliness and stigmatization were also exhibited by victims (De Luca *et al.*, 1995, 1993). Hack *et al.* (1994) found similar results in boys who had been sexually victimized. If left untreated, the same behaviors exhibited in childhood can be carried into adulthood. These behaviors include anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sexual problems (Beitchman*et al.*, 1992; Finkelhor, 1990; Gold, 1986; Lisak, 1994), revictimization (Beitchman*et al.*, 1992; Farber *et al.*, 1984; Finkelhor, 1990), suicidal tendencies (Beitchman*et al.*, 1992; Briere*et al.*, 1988; Finkelhor, 1990; Mullen *et al.*, 1996), fear, aggression (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Lisak, 1994), and guilt (Lisak, 1994).

This study examined the effect of sexual abuse on social adjustment street children. The following two hypotheses have been formulated for testing: (i) Social adjustment of street children who experienced sexual abuse will differ significantly from social adjustment of street children who did not experience sexual abuse; (ii) Social adjustment of boys and girls who experienced sexual abuse will differ significantly.

**Method**

The study was conducted in street children in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India.

**Sample**

Street Children (n=150) aged 6- to 12-years-old were randomly selected from three Rehabilitation homes in the city of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh. An equal number of boys (n=75) and girls (n=75).

**Measures**

The Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ) is a 34-item self-administered childhood sexual abuse experiences questionnaire, adapted from Finkelhor (1979). The SEQ was used to assess for a history of child sexual abuse. For the purposes of this study, sexual abuse was defined as any nonconsensual sexual experience involving contact (i.e., fondling, penetration, kissing) occurring at age 12 years or younger (Finkelhor, 1986). This age cutoff was employed to avoid inclusion of adolescent sexual experiences and is consistent with a large body of previous empirical investigations of childhood sexual abuse. Specifically, childhood sexual abuse was defined as contact abuse only and must have met one of the following criteria: (1) perpetrated by a relative, (2) greater than 5 year age difference between victim and perpetrator, or (3) if less than 5 year age difference between the victim and perpetrator, threat or force was involved (Messman-Moore& Long, 2000).

The second tool was the Social Adjustment Inventory. This instrument was originally based upon the Bell's Adjustment Inventory (Bell, 1939, 1962) which has a long tradition of adaptation in psychological research in India. In this study, the Pal (1995) version of the Social Adjustment Inventory (1995) was used after local adaptation to the Bengali language (Deb & Mukherjee, 2009). It was employed as a means of determining the degree of social adjustment held by each street child. The advantage of using this instrument lies in its wide use as it provides profiles of social adjustment in street children with a range of comparative childhood issues, for example, chronic illness or disability. In this version, there were 60 items each with response categories of 'yes' or 'no'.

**Procedure**

To collect data in rehabilitation homes, permission was sought and obtained from the rehabilitation homes authorities and then a tentative time schedule was developed for data collection.

Data were collected from the children during rehabilitation homes time. They gave informed, voluntary consent and all information provided by them was collected anonymously.

The ethical issues which were of particular concern in this study included the need to ensure participants were fully informed about the nature of the study and measures taken to preserve their privacy, the voluntary nature of participation, and the importance of their consent for the data collection process. Additionally, in research with potential to cause distress, it was important to implement subtle actions for monitoring participant distress during the research process and for ensuring ongoing support for children who may need it (Cashmore, 2006; Simmel, Flanzer., & Webb, 2006).

**Data analysis**

The data collected from the street children were subjected to a thorough in rehabilitation homes review, before data were entered for analysis. Apart from descriptive statistics such as measures of central tendency and dispersions, t-tests were used for verification of hypotheses. Confidence Intervals for group comparisons were calculated at 95% and significance levels were set at 0.01 and 0.001. Calculations were performed using SPSS version 17.

**Results**

The sample comprised 150 street children: 75 boys and 75 girls. Their ages fell into three groupings: 6- to 8-years-old (50%), 9- to 11-years-old (34%) and 12years-old and older (16%). Regarding the family type, in Nuclear families (36%) than joint families (16%) and Separate families (48%). Their educations level into four groupings: Illiterate (52.7%), 1 to 3 class (25.3%), 4 to 6 class (12.7%) and above 6 classes was (9.3%), table-1.

**Table-1: demographic of street children**

| | Male (n=75) | Female (n=75) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | | | |
| 6 to 8 yrs | *32* | *43* | *50* |
| 9 to 11yrs | *24* | *27* | *34* |
| 12 and above | *19* | *5* | 16 |
| Family types | | | |
| Join | *11* | *13* | *16* |
| Nuclear | *25* | *29* | *36* |
| Separate | *39* | *32* | *48* |
| Education | | | |
| Illiterate | *38* | *41* | *52.7* |
| 1 to 3 Class | *21* | *17* | *25.3* |
| 4 to 6 Class | *9* | *10* | *12.7* |
| Above 6 Class | *7* | *7* | *9.3* |

Result findings revealed that 22.5% of street children had experienced sexual abuse, 20.7% had experienced physical and 18% had experienced psychological abuse. The result shown between boys and girls was different experience types of abuse. For boys were more often victims of physical 21% abuse but in girls were more often victims of sexual abuse 25.1%, table-2.

**Table-2:Sexual, Physicaland Psychological abuse Experiences of Street Children**

| Type of abuse | Male (n=75) | Female (n=75) | Total N=150 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sexual | 19.9 | 25.1 | 22.5 |
| Physical | 21 | 20.4 | 20.7 |
| Psychological | 11.2 | 24.8 | 18 |

The mean social adjustment scores for sexually abused in street children and their non-abused counterparts was conducted using a series of unpaired t-tests (two-tailed) revealing significant differences for each abuse sub-type at the p<0.001 level, table 3.

***Table-3**: The Social Adjustment Scores of Sexually Abused and Non-Abused Street Children*

| Groups | N=150 | Mean | S.D | t | p. value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sexual Abuse | 91 | 22.7 | 6.76 | 9.98** | 0.001 |
| Non Sexual Abuse | 59 | 17.2 | 11.51 | | |

**Note: N=150 ** Significant at the <0.001**

The result shown that lower mean scores indicate poorer social adjustment: Street children who had experienced any form of abuse outside at home (street) recorded significantly poorer social adjustment than those children who had not experienced such abuse. The social adjustment of street children who experienced sexual abuse will differ significantly from social adjustment of street children who did not experience sexual abuse, so the hypothesis was supported.

Also result shown the social adjustment of sexually abused between boys and girls were difference, a further series of t-tests were conducted. Comparison of the mean social adjustment scores for boys and girls revealed significant differences for every abuse sub-type at the p<0.001 level, table-4. That is, girls showed significantly poorer social adjustment in response to their experiences of abuse when compared with boys. That means the hypothesis of social adjustment of boys and girls who experienced sexual abuse will differ significantly was supported.

**Table-4:The Social Adjustment Scores of Sexually Abused Street Children in Gender**

| Gender Sexual Abuse | N=150 | Mean | S.D | t | p. value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Males | 75 | 27.5 | 8.1 | 5.49** | 0.001 |
| Females | 75 | 42.1 | 8.91 | | |

**Note: N=150 ** Significant at the <0.001**

**Discussion**

*Results supported the hypotheses of this study. It would appear that individuals who have experienced sexual abuse as street children possess. Results from the social adjustment rating scalestreet children participants who were sexually abused as children to have significantly low levels of social adjustment than did nonabused participants. From the performance-system subscale, participants who reported sexualabuse as children also tended to report a lack of satisfying relationships,-friends, social interactions, as well as a need for more friends and social interactions.These findings were similar to studies conducted by Lisak (1994),Tong et al. (1987), and Widom and Ames (1994), who examined adult survivorsof childhood sexual abuse. Participants sexually abused as childrenalso reported higher levels of disinterest and lower levels of participationin community activities and affairs.*

The pervasiveness of physical (20.7%), psychological (18%), and sexual abuse (22.5%) experienced by the street children, both reflect and contradict previous research, than findings from similar studies conducted in other countries. For example, in the United Kingdom, May-Chahal and Cawson (2005) studied over 2,800 young adults with 16% reporting some type of childhood violence and 7% reporting severe physical abuse at the hands of their parents. In the USA, Hussey, Chang, and Kotch (2006) found 28.4% of their 10,828 respondents had been slapped, hit or kicked by a parent or adult caregiver. Gilbert and colleagues' (2009) review of the burden and consequences of violence against children in high-income countries reported on studies conducted in European countries which found rates of physical abuse of 12% in Macedonia and 29% in Moldava, and higher rates in rural than urban areas. In Segal's (1995) study of discipline practices of professional middle class Indian parents, 42% of parents used harsh discipline including kicking, biting, punching, striking with an implement, or beating. Sadowski, Hunter, Bangdiwala, and Munoz (2004) found 36% of Indian mothers used the same.

Findings from the current study, however, indicating that boys experienced more physical abuse than girls (21%) were not supported by data from the WorldSAFE study of child discipline practices in India which found boys and girls were harshly disciplined rather equally (Hunter, Jain, Sadowski, &Sanhueza, 2000).

Psychological or emotional abuse is the most common and intense form of abuses reported by Indian street children (Mathur, Rathore, &Mathur, 2009). Regarding the impact of psychological violence against children, Shaffer et al. (2009) observed that both emotional neglect and emotional abuse were associated with increased aggression and social withdrawal in middle childhood, and lower ratings of socioemotional competence in early adolescence. Other studies have shown that children's exposure to verbal aggression was the strongest predictor of adjustment difficulties (Moore &Pepler, 2006).Findings that one-quarter of the girl's experienced sexual abuse (25.0%) and those girls also experienced more sexual violence than boys (25.1%) were not unexpected: These findings are comparable with studies throughout the world. For example, in a meta-analysis of 39 children sexual abuse prevalence studies in 21 countries, Pereda, Guilera, Forns, and Gomez-Benito (2009) reported rates of 10% to 20% for girls and approximately 10% for boys.

Social adjustment is an important functional dimension of human life that isindicative of mental health. It is essential to well-being and to an individual's abilityto 'perceive, comprehend and interpret our surroundings, to adapt to them or change them if necessary, and to communicate with each other and have successfulsocial interactions' (Lehtinen, Ozamiz, Underwood, & Weiss, 2005, p. 46). In thisstudy, street children who experienced physical, psychological, or sexual abuse were found to have significantly poorer social adjustment when compared withnon-abused street children. These results are not surprising and are corroborated bynumerous existing studies indicating negative outcomes for street children experiencing maltreatment (Asnes&Leventhal, 2009; Gilbert et al, 2009). The present study found that female street children faced more social adjustment challenges than male street children. This can be understood in terms of thestructural inequalities in Indian society including gender inequality (Deb, 2006).

**Conclusion and implications**

The study found that boys were more oftenvictims of physical and psychological abuse while girls were more often victimsof sexual abuse. The social adjustment scores of street children who experienced abuse, regardless of the nature of the abuse,

was significantly lower whencompared with scores of those who had not experienced abuse. Social adjustmentwas poorer for girls than boys.

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