



THE DILEMMA OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: A SCOPING REVIEW

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Abstract

Background: This review was aimed at conceptualizing child sexual abuse (CSA) within theoretical framework. Towards this end, definition, prevalence, etiology and repercussions of child sexual abuse are addressed. The statistics of CSA may vary to a great deal across countries. The estimates are generally determined by the definitions of the concept used, the underlying factors studied and the extent of nature and quality of data.

Methodology: The databases like, Google scholar, web, newspaper reports and official websites were used to collect data. The relevant evidence was collected and secondary data analysis was performed.

Conclusion: Considerable development has been made in understanding of etiology and its adverse consequences. This understanding would help ameliorating the adverse effects of child sexual abuse and holds promising in advancing further research and intervention in this area. The alarming rates and facts about child sexual abuse disclosed in this study will call attention towards immediate action to develop child sexual abuse prevention programs particularly focusing parents, child and school based interventions in Pakistan.

Key words: Child Sexual Abuse, Physical and Psychological Effects, Prevention

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a widespread medical, social and psychological issue which often remains unreported despite its close association with significant mortality and morbidity (Schilling S et al., 2014). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) defines child abuse as any physical, sexual, neglectful, or careless treatment of children that has an actual or potential adverse influence on the child's wellbeing, survival, development, or self-respect in the context of a relationship or the use of power, trust, or responsibility (WHO, 2020). The term child abuse implies in a broader sense

to acts of commission and omission both. Commission refers to use of offensive words or actions which bring actual or potential harm to children whereas omission refers to neglect or failure of the care giver to fulfill basic needs of children. The offensive acts can be done on the part of individuals i.e. parents/relatives or at institutions such as schools, hostels etc. moreover, the incidents like war and famine make children more vulnerable to abuse. Abuse in any form impacts development of children into adulthood significantly. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2012) defines child sexual abuse as contacts or relations between a child and an adult, i.e., stranger, caretaker, sibling or even parent in which the child is treated as an object of satisfaction or pleasure for adult's needs. Such interactions are usually undertaken against the child by using force, bribes, trickery, or threats.

Child sexual abuse may exist in different forms including: assault, rape and sodomy, fondling, exhibitionism (forcing the child to show private parts), photographing child in nude, forcible kissing, sexual advances towards the child, exhibitionism (showing private parts to the child) and exposing the child to pornography (Radford L, 2011).

Moreover, it may occur in variety of situations, for a number of reasons. The phenomenon of child sexual abuse is for long being ignored by various segments of our society because social stigmas and cultural anecdotes actively promote subduing such sensitive issues (Ain NE, 2017). These practices in turn affect the law enforcing agencies' response towards child sexual abuse. Although there may be many oppressed segments existing in any society. However, one of the segments i.e. children stands helpless because they are dependent on elders and have little or no access to resources. Child sexual abuse is rampant around the globe. In Pakistan, children less than 12 years of age are more vulnerable to CSA (Sahil, 2011). The extent literature has focused more on prevalence rates or effectiveness of school based child abuse prevention programs (Barth J et al. 2013; Mathews B et al. 2016; Walsh K et al., 2018). However, understanding its etiology, perpetrators and the untold suffering abuse may create for victims for the rest of their lives is crucial to devise effective prevention strategies. Therefore, present study mainly aims at conducting scoping review. The research questions formulated in this regard are: how common is child sexual abuse, what is the etiology, who are the potential perpetrators of child sexual abuse and what could be the adverse consequences of abuse for the children.

Materials and Methods

This review was based on JBI (formerly known as the Joanna Briggs Institute) methodology for systematic review guidelines (Peters MD et al., 2020) whereas Meta-Analysis Extension for Scope Review (PRISMA-ScR) was used as writing guidelines (Page MG et al, 2020; Pollock, DP, 2023). The criteria for selection of the articles involved the studies reporting prevalence of child sexual abuse across the globe and particularly in Pakistan. Moreover, studies describing etiology and life-long consequences of abuse for sufferers and their family. The studies with full text available in English language published between 2010 and 2022 were selected for review. Their study designs ranged from descriptive, quantitative, quasi-experimental and mixed methods. The sources involved different online data bases, journals, books and review articles.

Search Strategy

The search strategy for this review involved three stages grounded on JBI methodology. The first stage involved initial searching using online databases and reviewing relevant titles and abstracts. The second stage involved a thorough search using all identified terms and keywords. Third stage involved identification of additional resources such as relevant editorials, news and reports on child sexual abuse.

Data Collection and Analysis

The search strategy for this review returned fifty articles. The duplicates were identified and removed. The titles and abstracts of remaining thirty articles were checked against the selection criteria

followed by a full text review. It resulted in exclusion of fifteen more articles as they were found inadequate by authors to justify conclusion of the study. Finally, fifteen articles were selected and included in the study for review.

Results

Table 1: Incidences of CSA cases in Pakistan between 2010 and 2020

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
No. of Cases	2,309	804	688	1788	1567	1719
Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
No. of Cases	2,447	2,321	1,838	2,012	2,252	2,303
Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
No. of Cases	2,788	3,002	3,508	3,768	4,139	3,445
Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	-----
No. of Cases	3,832	2,846	2,960	3,852	4,253	-----

Table 2: Adverse Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse

Psychological	Physical	Behavioral	Interpersonal
Post-traumatic stress disorder	Bleeding per vagina or infection	Violation of law and social conduct	Communication problems
Depression	Urinary tract infection	Lower academic performance and absenteeism	Insecure relations
Low self-esteem	Menstrual irregularities	Sexualized behaviors	Reduced social competence
Anxiety and panic disorders	Sexually transmitted infections including HIV	Exhibition of violent behavior	Lack of trust
Guilt and anger	Early pregnancy	Increased tendency to grow up as perpetrators	
Substance abuse	Gastrointestinal problems		
Attempt to suicide	Genital injury		
Hopelessness			
Affects cognitive and emotional development			

Source: Cashmore & Shackel, 2013; Singh et al., 2014

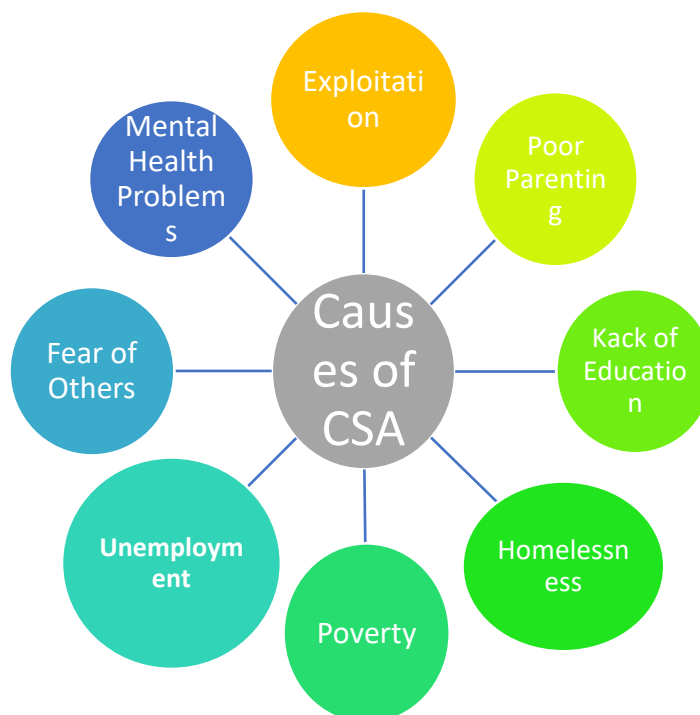


Figure 1: Causes of CSA (extracted from: Ain, 2017; Mehnaz 2018).

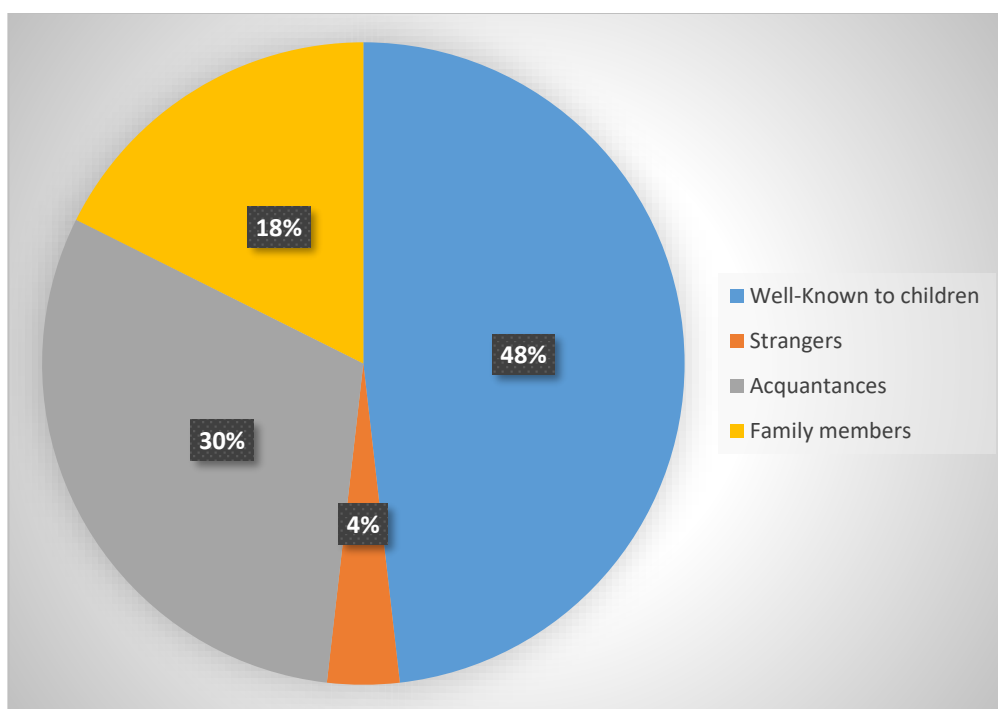


Figure 2. Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse

Source: United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. Child Maltreatment Survey, (2018).

Discussion

The analysis of the selected articles revealed major aspects involving prevalence rates around the globe, perpetrators, underlying causes and its consequences. All aspects are addressed in detail below:

Worldwide Prevalence of CSA

Existing literature indicates incidences of CSA in various countries involving but not limited to; Africa, Australia, United States, Canada, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Barth J et al., 2013; Finkelhor D et al., 2014). Although it is difficult to report exact figures since this phenomenon is under reported however, existing literature reports variations in prevalence rate of CSA gender wise and location wise. For instance, Barth et al 2013 revealed that prevalence rate CSA is higher for females i.e. 8-31% than males i.e. 3-17% for boys. In another study, Collin-Vezina D et al. (2013) found that Asia has lowest prevalence rates of CSA for both males and females whereas the highest rates of CSA were found in Australia (20%) for females.

Africa was found to have the highest incidence of CSA in the world in 2016 (Hillis S et al., 2016). According to a study carried out in Ghana by the Child Research and Resource Centre, 14% of the participants had been sexually abused. The survey also showed that females who had experienced both contact and non-contact types of CSA made up the majority of the victims of CSA. In a similar vein, a different survey found that 11.3% of males and 27.5% of girls had experienced sexual abuse (Ohene SA et al., 2015).

In low or middle-income Asian countries like India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, the phenomenon of under-reporting is higher due to various stigmas attached with CSA. However, a tentative estimation reveals that the prevalence rate in these countries lies between 10 to 53% (Russell D et al., 2020). Moreover, prevalence rates are also reported in terms of forms of sexual abuse. The non-contact sexual abuse rate was reported to be 31% for females and 17% for males; contact abuse rate was found to be 13% for females and 6% for males; forced intercourse was reported to be 9% females and 3% males whereas mixed sexual abuse cases were reported to be 15% for females and 8% for males

(Pereda N et al., 2009; Barth et al., 2013). Similarly, differences in prevalence rates of CSA around the globe have been found in terms of cultural and social contexts, economic status and development of particular regions (Barth et al., 2013). It is evident that CSA affects a significant portion of society and is all too widespread (Radford L et al., 2011)

Prevalence of CSA in Pakistan

Pakistan is a country having 52% of its population aged 18 or below (Hafeez A et al., 2023). According to UNICEF report in 2017 Pakistan faces several development challenges impacting the safeguarding of children including; quality of education, prevention of sexual exploitation of children, child trafficking, marriage, and labor. Despite everything, the full realization of Children's Rights is still going to demand enormous time and effort. Pakistan has over 80 million children and is suffering to fulfill their needs. This makes it crucial for interventions and policies to champion the rights of children efficiently. Only 20.88% of children live in urban areas and have access to fundamental needs.

As depicted by reported cases, the child abuse statistics have been varying over the past two decades, however, the latest data is based on Sahil's report titled 'Cruel Numbers 2022'. This report by Sahil organization was based on 88 national as well as regional newspapers. All provinces, including Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Jamu Kashmir (AJK), as well as the capital of Pakistan, Islamabad, recorded cases. The report revealed that the total number of cases 4253 were reported in newspapers all over the country. The report indicated that the cases of child sexual abuse had increased by more than 33% as compared to 2021(see Table 1).The statistics reveal that 55% of the victims were female children while 45% were male. The most vulnerable age range was found to be between 6-15 years however, children as young as 0-5 have also been abused. The report further stated that the perpetrators involved in child sexual abuse were mostly acquaintances, family members, service providers, women abettors and strangers. The geographical division indicated that Punjab has high child sexual abuse rate. Out of total 4253 cases, 47% cases were reported from rural while 53% cases were reported from urban areas. 59% of the total cases were only sexual abused cases, 2% cases reported murder after abuse. Out of 1303 reported cases of abduction, 233 (18%) cases reported sexual abuse after abduction. Similarly, 438 cases of missing children were reported during the year (Ahmad F et al., 2022).

Perpetrators and How They Operate

Researchers conducted various studies to explore the type of perpetrator and way they attempt to trap their targets. The study indicated that the perpetrators may belong to all walks of life. These may include, van drivers, security guards, teachers, servants, close relatives, extended family members, strangers or neighbors (Mehnaz A, 2018) (see Figure 2). The studies in this area revealed that the perpetrators use various different strategies to hide their abusive or grooming behavior. Grooming behavior on the part of perpetrator involves apparently friendly behavior, offering of candies/toys to children or use of force and coercion whenever needed (Ain, 2017). Numerous common traits were found by researchers to be linked to the later commission of CSA and to serve as obstacles to disclosure for their victims. These features include ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), cognitive dissonance, antisociality, Machiavellian and narcissistic traits, paedophilia, grooming, and offense-facilitating knowledge.

Causes and Adverse Consequences of Child Sexual Abuse

Numerous studies show that multiple elements work together to contribute to child sexual abuse rather than being alone accountable for this abhorrent crime (Ain, 2017; Mehnaz 2018) It was revealed that a single factor is not responsible for child sexual abuse instead different factors play collective role in creating such repulsive crime (see Figure 1). Research has revealed a wide range of adverse outcomes (both in infancy and adulthood) having a significant relationship to history of CSA because bad mental health impacts have been reported for many victims. It's crucial to remember that

not all victims of child sexual abuse have problems with their mental health and capacity to adjust as adults (Cashmore J et al., 2013) (see Table 2)

Many symptoms can appear in sexual assault victims during and years after the abuse has occurred. In addition to physical damage and suffering, the child also goes through psychological and emotional distress, both of which are harmful in the long run (Singh MM et al., 2014). Some of the adverse effects of child sexual abuse are discussed in the table below.

Limitations and Suggestions

Although this study contributed considerably to enhance understanding about the phenomenon of child sexual abuse, its etiology and consequences however certain limitations remain in truly addressing this issue. Our review was based on studies conducted during 2010 to 2022 and it was focused on sexual abuse in children only. In future a meta-analysis with a broader scope can be conducted. In addition, cultural and ethnic sensitivity should also be taken into consideration while addressing this issue. Longitudinal studies in this regard can help elucidate understanding of child sexual abuse and its adverse life-long effects on victims.

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse has now become an extensive and serious concern for the whole world. It renders various adverse effects on physical, psychological, behavioral and interpersonal well-being of the victims. The understanding gained through this review would help ameliorating the adverse effects of child sexual abuse and holds promising in advancing further research and intervention in this area. The alarming rates and facts about child sexual abuse disclosed in this study will call attention towards immediate action to inform development of child sexual abuse prevention programs particularly in Pakistan. It can be concluded from review that even at its lowest prevalence, CSA is a significant issue with a sizable victim population. Therefore, stringent measures are required for the prevention and control of global concern.

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