Impact of Sexual Abuse on Personality Disposition of Girl Children

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The broad objective of the study was to understand the impact of sexual abuse on personality disposition of girl children. In order to achieve the specific objectives of the study, three study tools were used and data were collected from a group of 120 sexually abused girl children and 120 non-sexually abused girl children for comparison of data. Findings revealed that majority of the victim girls (93.3%) came from nuclear families and a large number of them were illiterate. Nearly half of the girls were sexually abused between the ages 14 -17 years of age; about one-third was sexually abused between 10-13 years, and others were sexually victimized at a very young age, between 6-9 years. They were mostly abused by the strangers, followed by relatives and known local acquaintances. Majority of the incidents were not reported to police because of social stigma, harassment and threat from the perpetrators. Out of a total of 120 sexually abused girl children covered in the study, about 58.3% perceived counseling to be beneficial while the remaining 41.7% perceived it not to be facilitative. Multidimensional Personality Inventory explored five personality dimensions of the sexually abused children i.e., extroversion/introversion, self-concept, temperament, independence/dependence, and anxiety. Statistically significant differences were found in case of all the personality variables except dependence-independence. Sexually abused children were found to be more introvert, possessed low self-concept and more anxious than that of their counterparts i.e., non-sexually abused children. However, counseling improved self-concept of the sexually abused children and reduced their level of anxiety to some extent.

Keywords: Sexual Abuse; Personality Disposition; Child

Sexual abuse refers to sexual exposure or contact by a person older than a child for the purpose of sexual stimulation or exploitation regardless of the use of force or any accompanying physical injury. However, in definitions of the term given in scientific literature there are considerable variations in terms of criteria and specificity. In common use the term 'sexual abuse' is sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably with sexual offence, which means sexual activities that are prosecuted by law. Often it also refers to activities that are morally condemned in society.

However, this is a very ambiguous definition, because moral norms, socially accepted behavior and laws vary greatly both nationally and internationally and because the definition is too wide to be useful. Many researchers note that this leads to incompatible study findings and wrong generalizations, when different phenomena are often lumped together as if they had similar causes and results. Okami (1990) criticizes much of current research on adult-child sexual behavior and notes that 'much of the current victimology-based research employs polemical devices and research methods that blur the line between social science and social criticism'.

Having said that, it is undisputable that some of the phenomena covered by this

definition are real, harmful to the children and relatively prevalent, thus warranting attention to the problem. According to Oates (1996), sexual abuse of children means involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities, which they do not fully comprehend and to which they are unable to give informed consent. Sexual abuse includes touching, fondling and penetration.

Though estimates vary concerning the number of sexually abused children, the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) believes their numbers to exceed 100 million worldwide, not all of whom are located in "poor" or "developing" countries (UNICEF, 1997). Indeed, the first *World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children* (Muntarbhorn, 1996) confirmed that large numbers of prostituted children are to be found in rich countries, including in the U.S. for which the 'End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Exploitation' (ECPAT) estimated their numbers to be between 100,000 and 300,000 (ECPAT, 1996b). Other estimates suggest the numbers of sexually exploited children to be even higher (Goldman & Wheeler, 1986; Spangenberg, 2001).

Sexually abused children suffer from various short and long term psychological problems (Deb, 2005a; Deb & Sen, 2005; Chatteree et al., 2006). The specific objectives of the present study were; (i) understanding the socio-economic background of the abused children; (ii) understanding the impact of sexual abuse on personality disposition of girl children, and (iii) understanding the efficacy of counseling on personality dispositions of sexually abused girl children. The following hypotheses were proposed and tested:

Personality dispositions of sexually abused and non-sexually abused Indian girl children differ significantly, irrespective of age group.

Personality dispositions of sexually abused girl children aged between 13-15 years and 16-18 years of age differs significantly, irrespective of effectiveness of counseling as perceived by the subjects.

Personality dispositions of sexually abused girl children who received counseling and perceived it to be beneficial and those who did not receive counseling and/or did not perceive it to be beneficial differs significantly, irrespective of age group.

Method

Sample:

A group of 120 sexually abused Indian girl children aged between 13 – 18 yeas of age was covered in the study and they were selected following purposive sampling technique. Sexually abused girl children were selected four rehabilitation homes located in and around Kolkata. A group of 120 non-sexually abused girls were included in this study as comparison group and they were selected randomly from four schools situated in close proximity to the shelters. Non-sexually abused children were matched in terms of gender and age.

Tools:

(i) Sexual Abuse Screening: The Sexual Abuse Screening Questionnaire (Mukherjee, 2006) was used to screen the sexually abused girl attending schools and exclude them from the sample category of non-sexually abused children selected from the Indian schools to compare them with the findings of sexually abused girl children. Filling up the screening questionnaire was voluntary.

(ii) Background Information: The Background Information Schedule (Mukherjee, 2006) was used to gather information about socio-economic and familial background of the sexually abused children. In addition, the schedule was designed to gather information about the

history of abuse and reporting of sexual abuse to appropriate authorities.

(iii) Personality: Multidimensional Personality Inventory (Agarwal, 1988) - a standardized psychological test was used for collection of data from the study subjects. The term 'Personality' refers to the total functions of an individual who interacts with his/her environment. The inventory measures six dimensions of personality like extroversion-introversion, self-concept, dependence-independence, temperament, adjustment and anxiety. Each dimension has twenty items. Hence there are altogether 120 items in the inventory. The response is recorded against three mode of response like 'yes', 'sometimes' and 'no'. The subject gets a score of 3 if he/she answered 'yes', score of 2 for answering 'sometimes' and 1 for answering 'no'. Thus, the maximum score in each dimension is sixty and minimum score is twenty. The socio-cultural admissibility of the test was ascertained by the translating the items into the local Bengali language, which was checked by three experienced researchers. Next, the Bengali version of the test was retranslated into English to ascertain whether the meaning of the test items remained the same.

Procedure:

First, permission from the authorities of the one Government shelter and the three non-governmental shelters i.e., rehabilitation homes was obtained. A tentative time schedule was developed in consultation with the authorities of the shelters for data collection. Data were collected from the sexually abused Indian children following the face-to-face interviews. The date and time of the interview/data collection was decided as per the convenience of the study subjects. Ethical issues like informed consent, confidentiality of information and convenience of the subjects for data collection were strictly followed for collection of data. Finally, the participants were informed of their choice to

withdraw themselves at any point during the study period, if they so wished. In case of any confusion regarding the suitability of the subject for the study, appropriate counselors of the different shelters were consulted.

Data from non-sexually abused Indian girl children were recruited from four schools, suited in close proximity to the shelters, following the same procedures, as was done with the shelters. All the respondents were briefed about the objectives of the study and data were collected from those who willingly agreed to participate in the study. A self-administration method for data collection was employed in the case of non-sexually subjects.

The surveys collected from the sexually abused children and non-sexually abused Indian girl children were subjected to an in-house thorough review, and then entered with accuracy and precision into the computer for computation. For statistical analysis of the data, a Minitab statistical package was used. Descriptive statistics like measures of Central Tendency and Dispersions were used for quantitative data and t-test was used to verify the research hypotheses.

Results

Background Information:

About 45.8% of the sexually abused children stated that they were sexually abused between the ages 14 -17 years of age while 37.5% were abused between 10-13 years. The other 16.7% were sexually victimized at a very young age, between 6-9 years. Regarding the perpetrators of the abuse, nearly 55.8% were strangers while 29.2% were relatives. The remaining 15.0% belonged to the 'other' category, which constituted mostly (of) known local acquaintances.

As far as educational background is concerned, a large number of girls were found to be illiterate, with only 29.2% and 26.6% of

them having attended primary school and secondary education respectively. Most of the victimized girls (67.5%) had more than two siblings while 12.5% and 10.8% had two and one sibling respectively. So far as marital status was concerned, 20.0% were married while the remaining 80.0% were single. About 93.3% of the victim girls came from a nuclear family where only husband-wife and their children live together while 6.7% came from a joint family where other relatives are living with a couple and their children. About 38.3% of the respondents' fathers and 70.8% of their mothers were illiterate. About 33.3% of the fathers and 19.2% of the mothers studied up to primary level of education. Only a few (19.2% of the fathers and 8.4% of the mothers) had had the opportunity to study at to the secondary level. About 25.0% of the fathers were engaged in providing a service, 28.3% were involved in small-scale business, and 5.0% were casual workers. About 6.7% were unemployed, and 35.0% were involved in other chores like farming. Half of the mothers were housewives and 27.5% were appointed in some services like Ayahs, Anganwadi workers etc. The monthly income of 45.8% of the families was below Rs.1000 (US$ 24), 27.5% of the family's income ranged between Rs.1001-Rs.2000 (US$ 24 – 48), 13.3% had income above Rs.2001. The majority of the respondents lived in rural areas, while 33.3% had their home in the urban areas and about 20.8% of the girls domiciled in the semi-urban area.

Reporting of the cases to the police was found to be very poor. Majority (98.3%) of the abuse was not reported to the police; only two families reported the incident and received some kind of police assistance. More than half of the respondents (54.2%) stated that they did not report the incident to the police because of social stigma, which includes ostracization. About one-third (33.3%), went reported because the family members dreaded harassment as an aftermath of the report. About 12.5% of the respondents mentioned that their family was threatened by the perpetrator to suppress the report. Out of a total of 120 sexually abused girl children covered in the study, about 58.3% perceived counseling to be beneficial while the remaining 41.7% perceived it not to be facilitative.

Personality Disposition:

In order to understand the personality dispositions of the sexually abused girl children and for comparison of the same with the non-sexually abused girl children, Multi-dimensional Personality Inventory was used after local adaptation. The mean value of the sexually exploited children with regard to personality variables like self-concept and independence/dependence was found to be 40.83 and 48.06 respectively which were less than the mean value of non-sexually abused girl children i.e., 42.23 and 48.19 respectively. However, with regard to extroversion/introversion, the mean value of the sexually abused children was more (42.71) than that of their counterparts (41.30). In case of the fourth variable i.e., temperament, the mean of the victim children was again found to be more (40.70) which was more than the mean value of non-sexually abused children. Therefore, it can be deduced that the former group possessed better temperament than the latter one. Similarly, for the last variable, the mean value of the sexually abused children was 45.78 whereas for the non-sexually abused it was 42.27, which indicates that the former group is more anxiety prone.

In examining the first hypothesis, t-test was applied for comparing the means and standard deviations of sexually abused and non-abused girl children. Table 1 shows that 'p' value is less than 0.05 in case of all (extroversion/introversion, self-concept, temperament and anxiety) except one personality variable i.e., independence/dependence. Therefore, it may be stated that

first hypothesis i.e., 'personality dispositions of sexually abused and non-abused girl children differs significantly, irrespective of age group', has been accepted.

Table 1: Comparison of Scores of Sub-Scales of Personality Dispositions of Sexually Abused and Non-sexually Girl Children (Sexually Abused 120 and Non-abused 120)

Sub-scales	Sample Group	Mean	SD	t value
Introversion/	Sexually Abused	42.71	5.3	2.3*
Extroversion	Non-sexually Abused	41.3	4.1	
Self-concept	Sexually Abused	40.83	4.51	-2.03*
	Non-sexually Abused	42.23	6.07	
Dependence/	Sexually Abused	48.06	3.69	-0.26*
Independence	Non-sexually Abused	48.19	4.35	
Temperament	Sexually Abused	40.7	5.91	3.5*
	Non-sexually Abused	38.35	4.38	
Anxiety	Sexually Abused	45.78	4.72	5.77*
	Non-sexually Abused	42.27	4.71	

*$p < .05$

To verify the second hypothesis, t-test was applied for comparing the means and standard deviations of two groups of sample (Table 2). It has been observed that 'p' value is more than 0.05 in case of all the personality variables viz., extroversion/introversion, self-concept, independence/dependence, temperament and anxiety of sexually abused girl children of dissimilar age group. Hence, it may be stated that the second hypothesis i.e., 'personality disposition of sexually abused girl children aged between 13-15 years and 16-18 years differs significantly, irrespective of effectiveness of counseling as perceived by the subjects' has been rejected.

However, it has been observed that the mean scores for older sexually abused girl children were greater in case of all the personality variables as compared with the younger ones. Sexually abused girls of 16-18 years age group seemed to be more independent as well as more anxious about their future and better tempered than their younger similitude. Both the population possessed quite low self-concept.

Table 2: Comparison of Scores of Sub-Scales of Personality Dispositions of two Different Age Groups of Sexually Abused Girl Children

Sub-scales	Sexually Abused Girl Children	Sample	Mean	SD	t value
Introversion/ Extroversion	13-15	45	42.51	4.97	-0.31
	16-18	75	42.83	5.52	
Self-concept	13-15	45	40.73	4.51	-0.19
	16-18	75	40.89	4.54	
Dependence/ Independence	13-15	45	47.22	3.44	-1.94
	16-18	75	48.56	3.77	
Temperament	13-15	45	39.51	5.15	-1.72
	16-18	75	41.41	6.25	
Anxiety	13-15	45	45.51	5.35	-0.49
	16-18	75	45.95	4.33	

*$p < .05$

In case of third hypothesis, Table 3 shows that 'p' value of two categories of sexually abused girl children i.e., those who benefited from counseling and those who did not, were more than 0.05 in case of all (viz. extroversion/introversion, independence/ dependence, temperament and anxiety) except one variable i.e., self-concept. It means that the group, which benefited from counseling possessed higher self-concept in comparison to those who did not profit from counseling. It can also be deduced from the data that the first categories of sexually abused children, as seen by their mean scores, were less anxious than those of their counterparts.

However, the last hypothesis i.e., 'personality disposition of sexually abused girl children who received counseling and benefited and who did not receive counseling and/or were not benefited from counseling differs significantly, irrespective of age group' has been rejected.

Table 3: Comparison of Scores of Sub-Scales of Personality Dispositions of Sexually Abused Girl Children Who Benefited and/or Not Benefited From Counseling

Sub-scales	Sexually Abused Girl Children	Sample	Mean	SD	t value
Introversion/	Benefited from counseling	70	42.63	4.42	-0.19*
Extroversion	Not benefited from counseling	50	42.82	6.39	
Self-concept	Benefited from counseling	70	41.97	4.61	3.41*
	Not benefited from counseling	50	39.24	3.88	
Dependence/	Benefited from counseling	70	48.34	3.12	1.00*
Independence	Not benefited from counseling	50	47.66	4.37	
Temperament	Benefited from counseling	70	40.73	5.23	0.06*
	Not benefited from counseling	50	40.66	6.80	
Anxiety	Benefited from counseling	70	45.40	4.68	-1.05*
	Not benefited from counseling	50	46.32	4.78	

*$p<.05$

Discussion and Conclusion

Majority of the victim girls (93.3%) covered in the study came from nuclear families and they belonged two age groups, 13-15 years and 16-18 years. A large number of girls were found to be illiterate. Socio-economic data clearly indicates a positive relationship between poverty, illiteracy and parental poor educational background and abuse (Deb, 2002; 2005a; 2005b).

Nearly half of the sexually abused girl children indicated that they were sexually abused between the ages 14 -17 years of age while about one-third was sexually abused between 10-13 years. The others were sexually victimized at a very young age, between 6-9 years. They were mostly abused by the strangers, followed by relatives and known local acquaintances. About tow-third were abused after being drugged and sold to brothels in various major cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Pune and also Kolkata. Others mentioned that they left home because they were lured with better job prospects in big cities and were consequently entrapped in this vicious cycle (Deb et al., 2005).

Regarding reporting of the cases to the police and other competent authorities, data indicated that the majority (98.3%) of the abuse was not reported to the police; only two families reported the incident and received some kind of police assistance. This statistic is a major cause of concern. More than half of the respondents did not report

the incident to the police because of social stigma, which includes ostracization. About one-third reported the incidence because the family members dreaded harassment as an aftermath of the report. Another factor for not reporting the incidents of sexual abuse include threatened by the perpetrator to suppress the report. Law enforcement agencies and NGOs should think over the issue of reporting and effort should b made to increase reporting. Otherwise, perpetrators will keep on abusing innocent children.

Out of a total of 120 sexually abused girl children covered in the study, about 58.3% perceived counseling to be beneficial while the remaining 41.7% perceived it not to be facilitative. In case of individual counseling of some children, counselors had more than one session in a week. Counselors focused on a number of issues in different sessions like abuse, depression, future aspiration and positive thinking. All the sexually abused children received counseling at least for a period of two to three months. There is a need to train the counselors for effective counseling and counseling should be continued for a longer period to specify the negative affects of abuse.

Multidimensional Personality Inventory explored five personality dimensions of the sexually abused children and the data were then compared with the non-sexually abused children. Statistically significant differences were found in case of all the personality variables like introversion-extroversion, self-concept (Roosa, Reinholtz, & Angelini, 1999), temperament and anxiety except dependence-independence. Sexually abused children were found to be more introvert, possessed low self-concept and more anxious than that of their counterparts i.e., non-sexually abused girl children. On the other hand, it may be stated that the sexually abused children, after silently suffering so much, desire to stand up on their own feet and gain financial independence. They realize that they are alone in this world and they have to have patience and survive on their own since social and family supports are lacking. With regard to temperament, it can be pointed out that perhaps overtly, sexually abused girl children seek to sustain a healthy and smooth relationship with the authorities and their peers and cope up with the perceived unfavorable situations taciturnly since there is no stand in support. Surprising, counseling improved self-concept of the sexually abused children only and reduced their level of anxiety to some extent out of six personality variable. It could be because of inexperience and inadequate number of professional and trained counselors in the rehabilitation homes. For counseling of traumatic children, counseling should be trained and skilled. However, this issue requires further investigation.

Finally, it may be stated that sexually abused children become more introvert, possessed low self-concept and become more anxious (Deb & Sen, 2005). Although counseling is found to be beneficial in increasing the self-concept and reducing the anxiety to some extent, there is a need to extend intensive counseling for a longer period of time. There is also an urgent need to recruit more trained counselors and psychologists in the rehabilitation homes to deal with traumatic children more professionally and efficiently.

In order to save the innocent and poor girl children in the rural areas, there is a need to take up awareness programme in the rural areas on child trafficking and in this regard local panchayat should take the initiative along with NGOs and social welfare department (Deb, 2006).

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