

## **Societal Role in Responding to Child Abuse**

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### **Abstract**

The article explores the phenomenon of child abuse as it exists in the society through the statistics and systems that foster the occurrence. It looks at the impact of abuse in its various forms can have on children, not just in their childhood but even as adults. The article brings about the significance of strategies of prevention rather than interventions post abuse. It emphasizes how it is the community that is responsible as a cohesive whole in keeping its children safe.

**Key words:** Child abuse, role of society

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### **Introduction**

JawaharLal Nehru said that “You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women”. It is a universally agreed statement. However, looking around, it will be apt to say that the status of a country can be judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable population group- the children.

The human child is perhaps the only species that has the longest duration of dependence. Children are physically, emotionally and developmentally immature and take a longer time in achieving maturity and self-sufficiency. History reveals that children have been the responsibility of the significant adult around for his/her safe keeping and care. Ever since man has settled into the communal life to the current scenario where man has been divided into miniscule cubicles of “nuclear existence”, children have been under the care of the significant adults in their lives.

### **Child Abuse in India**

India is home to most children in the world. Around 19% of the world's

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children have their homes in the country. Childline(2014) reveals that maximum incidences of child abuse-sexual happens in India; one out of ten children is abused at any given point in time, a child under ten years of age is abused every 13th hour. A nation-wide study commissioned by the Government of India in 2007 reveals that one in every two child is abused –either physically, emotionally or sexually(MWCD, GoI, 2007). UNICEF in a study conducted between 2005-13 estimates that at least 42% girl children are exposed to sexual abuse before their teenage.

Kerala has in the recent period seen a spate in reporting of child abuse cases. Most of which also have to do with sexual abuse experiences. 55.04% of boys and 44.96% of girls in Kerala have reported the experience of sexual abuse (the actual figures, including the unreported cases would be much higher). This happens to be more than the national standards of 52.94 % among boys and 47.06% among girls (Study on Child Abuse, GoI, 2007). The gravity of the situation demands that the child be ensured justice at the earliest and most effective form. Sexual abuse is perhaps one of the most insidious crimes that can be committed against children. The abuse involves the whole gamut of violations- physical abuse, emotional abuse and trust abuse. Nonetheless, in any abuse experience, the child is often left feeling powerless and helpless without any understanding of the experience. In a majority of cases, (s)he is not even aware of the import of the abuse perpetrated against him/her- at least not until (s)he gains some comprehension on the issue.

World Health Organization (2014) defines Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age it includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. Exposure to intimate partner violence is also sometimes included as a form of child maltreatment.

Repeated abuse and maltreatment takes its own toll on the victim; more so when the victim is a young and dependent child. The effect that regular abuse can have on a child, who is growing intellectually, psychologically, and physically is not just immediate or short term but ones that can last a lifetime.

Finkelhor and Browne (1986) found the long-term effects of maltreatment to include poor self-esteem, difficulty trusting others, anxiety, feelings of isolation and stigma, depression, self-destructive tendencies, sexual maladjustment, and substance abuse. The results of a study with women who reported sexual abuse prior to age 12, revealed that they suffered from low rates of secondary school completion, long-term mistrust of others, illness, depression, dissociation, sleep problems, self-injury and self-mutilation, eating disorders, agoraphobia, and painful memories (Hughes, et al., 1998). These findings affirm what other researchers have found: a clear link between a history of child sexual abuse and higher rates in adult life of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Mullen & Fleming, 1998).

Finkelhor(1984), proposed the effects of sexual abuse as Traumagenic Dynamics. That is, a child consistently subjected to sexual abuse develops four core psychological/behavioral states, namely,

1. Stigmatization,
2. Betrayal,
3. Powerlessness and
4. Traumatic Sexualisation.

To elucidate, Traumatic Sexualisation is the process of creating skewed ideas on sex and sexuality caused by the abusive relation and the grooming tactics that the perpetrator applies to seek the child's acquiescence. Stigmatization is the feeling where the child sees himself/herself as "damaged goods", as being "impure" because of the abuse and hence riddled with guilt and shame. Powerlessness is the state of helplessness; the inability to do anything on their own including seek safety from abuse. When known and trusted adults misuse their power and abuse the child, they are left with a sense of betrayal and perhaps a lifelong inability to trust or have intimate relationships. Finkelhor states that these traumagenic dynamics are also applicable to victims of other forms of abuse who are subjected to it consistently. Each of the abuse experience involves a sense of betrayal, powerlessness, stigmatization suffered by the child irrespective of the form of abuse.

### **Economic Cost of Child Abuse**

Going by the current statistics on the prevalence of child abuse and the effects it can have for a victim, one can imagine the quality of nation building that is happening in the country currently.

The cost of overcoming the abuse experience on an individual survivor is immense. A child is very rightly considered resilient, however the toll consistent abuse experience can take on in a young and vulnerable child is enormous. The scars of an abuse experience can take a lifetime to overcome; perhaps even that is not adequate. In such a scenario, the impact of having half a population as survivors of abuse, can be colossal to the nation.

On the other hand, in the current context of nucleated existence, when every one child out of two is abused in the country, it creates a huge burden to get these children back up on their feet. The legal costs, the medical costs and the costs to the correctional systems and the psychological services accessed, if any, all add up to a huge additional cost on the state exchequer. The additional burden of the costs borne due to unresolved issues, psychological problems of the abuse survivors as adults and the Cycle of Violence that such experience can initiate is unfathomable. Though actual statistics on the costs and economics for India is unavailable, a look at the global costs would reveal the extent of damage incurred. The global economic impacts and costs resulting from the consequences of physical, psychological and sexual violence on children are estimated to be as high as \$3 trillion (Pereznieto et al, 2014).

Research proves that the cost incurred for intervention in cases of abuse in comparison to prevention programmes is far more (Pereznieto, 2014). Also, to be acknowledged is the fact that work on the preventive and responsive aspect for child abuse is very low, scattered and most often occurs without adequate documentation. India has in recent years jacked up its efforts in combating the malaise of child abuse, most of it is at the intervention level, i.e: as a consequence of the abuse event occurring. However, there is a critical need for the preventive efforts also to be made more robust and responsive in our society. Commitment of human and financial resources on behalf of the state is critical to make any meaningful difference. UN's Global Survey on Violence

against children reveals that only 4% out of 100 countries provide full resources for policies and programmes for violence against children (UN,2006). This cost is much higher than what it takes to invest in a prevention programme (Pereznieto et al, 2014).

The role of the state in ensuring the rights of the child is established without doubt. However, it is also imperative to understand that ensuring the child his/her rights is not just limited to the state and its machinery but by the significant adults around the children, each by the basic virtue of being a member of the society.

### **Societal Role in Responding to Child Abuse**

In the primitive society where communal living was the norm, the child and child rearing was the combined role of the members of the community. The society then together contributed in the upbringing and safe keeping of its young. A nurtured childhood naturally resulted in resilient, productive and contributing citizens as adults.

Today, when families have collapsed into their own nucleus, the child has limited recourse to safety and protection. The role of parents has increased exponentially with very access to support systems being restricted severely. When the whole gamut of the rights of the child falls onto the overburdened shoulders of parents, there are bound to be slip ups. The current crime statistics on their way up are a clear indicator of the same.

However, we need to view the reality afresh. Even though it may appear so at first glance, in reality, there are several sectors in the society that come together to contribute towards the upbringing of the young population even today. Ever since a life is conceived, numerous parts of the society rush in from the extended family to the medical professionals to the state machinery. The medical fraternity allows the child's safe entry into the society. The state department gives him/her a tangible identity and proof of existence. Thereafter, the sustained contribution by medical fraternity followed by the education system socializes and moulds them into social beings capable of becoming contributing members. The child is constantly surrounded by adults in various forms and roles; parents, grandparents, older siblings, teachers, school staff, tuition teachers, the list is endless.

In committing to the ethos of the rights of the child, we need to acknowledge the multifarious roles that each component has in keeping the “abuse” out of the child.

The risk factors associated with child maltreatment can be grouped in four domains:

- Parent or caregiver factor
- Family factor
- Child factor
- Environment factor.

Both risk factors and protective factors are present simultaneously at the level of the individual, the family, the community and environment, the culture, and the society, and can interact in myriad ways to result in different types and combinations of child maltreatment. Child abuse or maltreatment is an extreme on a continuum, a severe manifestation of dysfunction in the interplay between a child’s development and the conditions and relationships that affect that development. These complexities make it difficult to promote social change, and challenge efforts to devise, conduct, and disseminate research on societal interventions and initiatives.

However, nothing is insurmountable when there is a cohesive and sustained effort on part of the authorities. Without doubt, prevention requires an “increased social investment in family and community” (Wachtel, 1994).

The idea that safety of each child is the responsibility of each member of the society needs to take root in our collective psyche rather than just working with exclusive systems.

To begin with, there needs to be a shift in social perspective on how the children are perceived. It is imperative that they be viewed as individuals in their own right albeit their developmental “shortcomings” rather than being looked upon as property with ownership rights. The basic premise of a child being an individual in his/her right needs to be affirmed.

A paradigm shift in how an adult views a child which will take time to evolve and develop. But consistent and simultaneous efforts at various levels of the social system may perhaps be the answer. To bring about such a shift may be a long and arduous process, but then access to protocols and creation of standard operating procedures amongst child care specialists and profes-

sionals could be a beginning.

For example, trainings for the medical fraternity in identifying signs-physical and behavioural, of abuse in children who come to them even for reasons other than reported abuse. The skill set to be explore beyond what is told and what meets the eye is needed by professionals who come in contact with children. The easiest way to make this happen is to put in place protocols and ensure their implementation.

Similarly, professionals working in child based settings like schools, day care, entertainment parks, libraries etc. can be provided with training on identifying at risk children, to be alert for signs of violence, in any form in their lives. They also need to be sensitized to discern the situation of children and be alert to any signs of abuse/violence in their lives They could also be signatories to the organizational child protection policies that explicitly lay out protocols in interacting with children.

Alongside such explicit measures, steps needs to be taken at the three areas having potential for broad, societal-level intervention efforts: 1) increasing economic self-sufficiency of families; 2) enhancing communities and their resources; 3) discouraging corporal punishment and other forms of violence. In general, cultural sensitivity and information access and use cut across these intervention efforts, as well as most of contemporary social development.

### Conclusion

Small steps in concerted manner that are sustained would eventually result in inculcating the right ethos among the adults in the society. Therefore, child abuse and neglect can be prevented and the welfare of children promoted by activities and initiatives, that are culturally appropriate, aimed at communities, states and whole of the country.

These societal level prevention efforts can be the key components in a comprehensive response to ensuring child rights and child protection from violence in all its forms.

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*Educere-BCM Journal of Social Work*

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