



Prevalence and risk factors of child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of children in South Asian countries:A literature review.

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Abstract

Child Sexual Abuse is include range of sexual acts like intercourse, child prostitution, inviting a child to touch sexually, exhibitionism, child pornography and online child luring by cyber-predators. Protection of children from sexual abuse is a global concern. Child sexual abuse can have multiple adverse consequences on physical and psychological health of children which can extend to adult life.

South Asia is southern region of the Asian continent which consists of 8 countries consists of 19 billion population. This paper describes the prevalence and risk factors for child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation in South Asia region. There is wide range of prevalence in child sexual abuse in different countries of South Asia as well as studies done within countries. Exposure and perpetration of child sexual abuse is a multi-factorial phenomenon based on interplay between individual, family, community, and societal factors .Commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the most serious problems seen in South Asia. Multiple etiological factors have been identified as predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating factors throughout the region. It is evident that identification, management and prevention of child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation in South Asia is still at very primitive level and still only the tip of the iceberg is visualized.

Key wards

Prevalence, risk factors, child sexual abuse, exploitation, South Asia.

Background

Child Sexual Abuse is defined by World health organization as the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, that violate the laws or social taboos of society[1]. It can include range of sexual acts like intercourse, child prostitution, inviting a child to touch sexually, exhibitionism, child pornography and online child luring by cyber-predators [2]. Protection of children from sexual abuse is a global concern. Child sexual abuse can have multiple adverse consequences on physical [3] and psychological [4] health of children which can extend to adult life [5].

South Asia is southern region of the Asian continent which consists of 8 countries including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. According to the latest United Nations statistics the current population of Southern Asia is 19 billion which is estimated to be 24.89% of the total world population [6]. World Bank's 2011 report shows approximately 24.6% of population in South Asia is under the international poverty line [7]. A study done to assess the global prevalence of violence against children reported more than half of children aged 2 -17years in Asia, Africa and North America experienced violence [8]. Commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the serious issues faced by South Asian countries as a part of economic constraints [12]. Commercial sexual exploitation of children is mainly categorized in to five types which include child sex tourism, child prostitution, child pornography , child trafficking and early marriages [13].

Objectives

This paper describes the prevalence and risk factors for child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation in South Asia region.

Prevalence of child sexual abuse in South Asian countries

There is wide range of prevalence in child sexual abuse in different countries of South Asia as well as studies done within countries.

Studies done in India among girls below 18 years of age found to have 4% -41% prevalence of sexual abuse [9]. 4% to 57% range of prevalence of sexual abuse reported among boys in educational institutions in India [10]. In Pakistan nearly 7 children reported to be sexually abused daily in year 2019 [11]. Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (a nongovernmental organization) reported 713 incidents of rape and attempted rape of children less than 18 years in rural Bangladesh from July 2007 to June 2010[14]. This rape and attempted rape constituted 64% of all reported incidents of violence against children [14]. In a study done in Nepal to find the prevalence of sexual abuse among high school children found 41.3% of children to experience some form of sexual abuse [15]. In Maldives the prevalence of child sexual abuse among girls was 12.2% and the highest reported rate (16.3%) was from the capital, Malae6]. In Bhutan national survey done in 2016 reported that more than 1 in 10 children (12.8%) have experienced at least one incident of sexual violence in their lifetime [17]. In Sri Lanka prevalence of sexual abuse among adolescents reported to be 21.9% [18]. Child sexual abuse is known to occur in Afghanistan, but is totally unreported as sexuality is a remarkably stigmatized subject and no statistics available [23].

It is difficult to do a comparison between the prevalence of sexual abuse among countries due to the differences in methodologies in studies.

Risk factors for child sexual abuse in South Asia

Exposure and perpetration of child sexual abuse is a multifactorial phenomenon based on interplay between individual, family, community, and societal factors.

In Sri Lanka studies have identified carelessness of parents [19], conflicts with in the family [20] and poverty [21] as some risk factors for child sexual abuse. Many poverty related factors which contribute to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children are abandonment, moving to industrial areas , start to work from very young age and educational deprivation. Financially deprived families are easy targets for commercial child sexual exploitation [21].In India women with

psychiatric disorders, men who have sex with men and commercial sex workers were found to be at higher risk of victimization of childhood sexual abuse [9]. A study done in Pakistan reported poor maternal education, domestic violence and poor parental relationships as risk factors for child sexual abuse [22]. Hiding of domestic sexual abuse in children, blaming the child victim for the abuse, social stigma, not believing the child victims by adults, gender discrimination contributes to confusion about victimization of sexual abuse are some precipitating and perpetuating factors for child sexual abuse in South Asian region [23]. Social norms related to virginity and family honor also tend to normalize and hide child sexual abuse to prevent immeasurable shame on child and family if disclosed [23].

Commercial sexual exploitation of children in South Asia

Commercial sexual exploitation of children is one of the most serious problems seen in South Asia. Multiple etiological factors have been identified as predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating factors throughout the region.

In Sri Lanka economic difficulties, early school dropout, negative experiences at school, parental negligence, marginalization, poor values attached to childhood, large family size, punishments at home, seeking employment, death of parents and broken homes, mother migrated abroad, victimization of sexual abuse are identified as some predisposing and precipitating factors of child commercial sexual exploitation. Some identified factors to perpetuate the behavior are peer pressure, incentives, external persuasion and force by adults. Loss of virginity is yet another reason for a girl to be "pushed" into this behavior. Family members already in the trade, drug addiction, addiction to sex, peer networking, indecisive towards the future, feeling miserable and frustration are also identified maintaining factors. Seeing engagement in commercial sexual exploitation as an employment also a maintaining factor for many young people [24].

In India trafficking in children is one of the main reflections of commercial sexual exploitation of children which happens in large scale [25]. Mainly children are affected from poor families and areas affected by natural or manmade disasters [26]. Commercial Sexual Exploitation of boys in Pakistan is not a new phenomenon which has been manifested in multiple covert and overt ways [27] and the etiological factors are more or less the same as other South Asian

countries. Child trafficking and sexual exploitation remain largely taboo in Bangladesh society which resulted in very limited quantitative data on this subject. Limited awareness among children about their legal rights is one of the main perpetuating factors in Bangladesh. Similar to other regions in South Asia poverty, disrupted family, poor education level and disability are identified as major risk factors in Bangladesh as well. In Bangladesh reintegration to the society after exploitation is a challenge due to remarkable stigma and taboo attached to it [28]. In Nepal, the child prostitution is believed to be spreading all over the country, predominantly along high ways and urban areas. So far Bhutan and Maldives have not recognized commercial sexual exploitation of children as a significant problem and statistics are scanty [29].

Adverse consequences of child sexual abuse and exploitation

This can result in multiple physical, psychological and societal consequences for victims throughout their life. Victims of child abuse and exploitation are at higher risk for getting depression, anxiety, Post traumatic stress disorder, preoccupation about sex and inappropriate sexualized behaviors, anger, guilt, shame and other emotional and behavioral problems throughout their life span[30][31]. They are also more likely to experience alcohol related problems, substance misuse, suicide attempts, relationship and marriage/family problems [32]. Victims can also experience negative health outcomes in adult life such as liver, heart, lung disease and malignancies [33].

Conclusion

It is evident that identification, management and prevention of child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation in South Asia is still at very primitive level and still only the tip of the iceberg is visualized.

Competing interests

No competing interests were disclosed

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