

FOCUS

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Implications, Occurrence, Aetiology, Effects, Intervention, and Prevention

by Akhter Jahan Rahman

The child victim of sexual abuse grows up with conflicting emotions. On the one hand she is dependent on the adult world for survival. On the other hand, the same adult world inflicts pain upon her without making any sense.

WHAT is child sexual abuse? How does it impact upon the child?

Child sexual abuse is: Engaging a child in an age-inappropriate act. It is an abusive act imposed on a child by someone older than the child, it is an imposition even if the child is a "willing" participant because of her/his incomplete/immature cognitive and psychosocial development which renders her/him incapable of making rational and informed decisions in her/his best interests.

It is a physical assault on a body not fully developed for such adult activities. It is a *murder of innocence*. Children are sensual beings; they experience touch as availability of protection, safety and care of her/his basic needs for survival. Sexual touch is outside their developmental needs. It is a violation of their right to be innocent.

Child sexual abuse is a *betrayal of trust*. It is an act of violence against a being physically weaker than the perpetrator, and a being cognitively and emotionally incapable of experiencing her/his own right to protection — a being who is incapable of exercising the right to say, "No."

As an act of violence sexual abuse is an *abuse of power imbalance*; it is taking advantage of someone's vulnerability. Sexual abuse is an expression of disregard and disrespect for human rights, and an offence against morality.

Occurrence
Violence against the weaker members of society and abuse of power are not new. Sexual abuse, like any other abuse, has been taking place since time immemorial. It is the reporting of it that is new, the result of the Women's Rights Movement and the Children's Rights Movement.

Assault On Truth: Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, first spoke of incest — sexual abuse of children by close family members. In his psychoanalytic explorations of his patients, he saw a trend of childhood incest and sexual abuse by other trusted adults which traumatised and confused his patients as children, and ultimately led to the psychopathology which brought them to him. Freud presented a paper on his findings to his colleagues who rejected his explanations of psychopathology outright, and ostracised him. Many of these colleagues themselves had been child victims of sexual abuse, and had become abusers themselves as adults (it is well known that many psychiatrists/psychologists/social workers choose their professions in search of meanings

and explanations for their childhood difficulties or traumas.

Freud's life history suggests that he was the subject of some form of age-inappropriate sexual exposure by his mother. His colleagues' rejection threw Freud into a period of depression. He came out of it by rejecting his own original findings and understanding of his patients' memories of childhood trauma and consequent long-term post-traumatic stress disorder. He rejected his own original findings of the truth, and developed a theory of childhood sexual fantasies of his patients about their parents of the opposite sex. He called this the 'Oedipal Complex' after the Greek King, Oedipus, who, being separated from his mother as a baby, grew up a stranger to his parents and married his father after he conquered his father's kingdom and killed him. Freud hypothesized that all children go through this fantasy and resolve it as they grow; those children who do not manage to resolve this fantasy, develop a complex which leads to psychopathology in adulthood.

Years later Freud's original truth was discovered amongst his papers, along with correspondence between him and Ferenczi, another psychiatrist who believed in the original truth. Ferenczi, in his interpretations of the trauma and the conflict experienced by the child victims, coined the phrase, "identification with the aggressor", to explain how the child victim accommodates the abuse for survival.

Thus, we see that sexual abuse has been taking place for a long time, and incest and sexual abuse by other trusted adults have been and are more common than sexual abuse by strangers. This is why it has been shrouded in secrecy as, children in these cases, are helpless and dependent on the abusers in some way, and are vulnerable to threats of harm to them or to their families, if they disclose the abuse. Even today, it is the stranger abuse that gets the most publicity.

Sexual abuse takes place of both boys and girls, and by adults of both sexes. However, it is more common of girls and by male perpetrators. Hence, for ease of writing and for reading, it is the girl victims and the male perpetrators who will be referred to in this paper.

Aetiology
The act of abuse, violence of trust, etc., is the result of personality disorders or defects, including deficits in the development of social and moral values. It is the lack of development of respect for oneself and for others; lack of self-con-

fidence in the ability to meet one's needs by legitimate means; the lack of understanding of and interest in a child's developmental needs; the lack of adequate interpersonal skills; lack of impulse control; and an inability to empathize with others. Such personality defects are often the long-term outcome of childhood neglect and/or abuse of the perpetrators themselves. They are also the result of inadequate discipline and guidance by parents and other important teaching agents in the growing years of the perpetrators. It happens more in the lower socio-economic cultures, but it also happens in the more affluent cultures.

In the lower socio-economic levels, inadequate parenting is often the result of economic and social stresses, lack of education and understanding of human rights and respect, lack of moral development, neurological dysfunction, and psychosocial inadequacies. In the middle and upper classes, parenting inadequacies are often associated with psychological unavailability of the primary care-giver due to factors such as post-natal depression or other forms of biologically and/or psychologically caused psychopathology; marital conflict; births of children in quick succession making primary care-giver unavailable to toddlers; lack of support, inadequate knowledge and understanding of child development, parent-infant conflict (especially in cases of infants with some neurological dysfunction or excitable temperament), and other forms of environmental stress.

Parent-child conflict can lead to verbal and/or physical abuse by a stressed parent. Such conflict and harsh discipline can lead to the child not developing trust in the care-giver's ability to nurture him, a trust that is a prerequisite for the child to accept parental control and discipline, and to internalise moral values; and to develop empathy. Children in such situations are socially disadvantaged and isolated.

This renders them vulnerable to immoral extra-familial influences. For such children can turn to manipulative immoral neighbours, teachers, and corrupt religious care-takers, for attention and show of affection in exchange for sex. Such a child is not likely to grow up a sexual offender himself, through poor self-esteem, lack of interpersonal skills, unresolved anger, cognitive distortions, etc.

Effects

Effects of sexual abuse vary according to the age of the victim, the age difference between the victim and the perpetrator, the relationship between them, the manner of perpetration (i.e. use of force or manipulation into 'giving' consent); whether the child was able to disclose the abuse to a trusted adult or not, the reactions of others, whether she was believed or not, whether she was blamed for it, etc. It has been found that, coercive abuse by a person in authority and in a care-taking relationship with the child, has more damaging effect than otherwise, especially if the child is between five and 12 years of age when being abused.

Short-term Effects: The adverse effects of child abuse, at the minimal level, confuses the child, and at maximum levels, traumatises her, with serious developmental implications on cognitive and psychosocial functioning. A child's cognitive development requires exploration of the environment, mastery of challenges and obstacles, and the acquisition of skills. The development of psychosocial maturity and adjustment requires a sense of trust, safety, and security, training in impulse control, empathy, and responsiveness to her needs, a sense of fairness, a sense of personal power ("I can impact upon the environment"), and of interpersonal assertiveness ("I have the right to say 'No'"), permission freedom to express her individuality, and, of course, appropriate modelling.

Confusion and trauma causes the child to be fearful

and insecure to explore her world. Instead, she is constantly trying to make sense of her abuse, and remains vigilant to try and avoid further pain. This reduces the victim's psychological availability to her environment; she lacks concentration, and self-confidence, which affects her learning. IQ testing of abused children consistently yields results with significant discrepancies in different areas of functioning, depending upon original endowment. Areas most affected by confusion and trauma are those requiring concentration and memory. Poor memory is also the result of the dissociating mechanism of the brain which is activated by trauma to protect the organism from experiencing severe pain.

At psychological levels, the child victim is found to be either withdrawn, or reactive, with externalised behaviour problems; to be lacking in age-appropriate social skills; either clingy or 'detached', lacking in problem solving skills, lacking in awareness of own emotions and needs, and lacking in empathy.

Long-term Effects: The child victim of sexual abuse grows up with conflicting emotions. On the one hand she is dependent on the adult world for survival. On the other hand, the same adult world inflicts pain upon her without making any sense. The natural response to pain is to flee or to fight back. The child victim can do neither. To flee would mean the absence of protection from the unknown dangers and starvation. To fight back would incur the wrath of the perpetrator, thereby leading to further pain. To do nothing means the continuation of the original pain.

How does a helpless child organize her response and learning? By accommodation and identification. She learns that the world is unfair, unpredictable, abusive, demanding, non-empathic and unresponsive. She has no protection with or without the perpetrator, and she has to spend all her energy in vigilance. That is, the child has to be responsive to the perpetrator's moods and needs to avoid abuse, accept and deny it when it still occurs, reframe it or justify as punishment for her 'badness' (this gives the child a false sense of control), and deny her own feelings and needs. This leads to low self-esteem, a sense of worthlessness, natural feelings of anger and frustration at lack of protection and nurture are necessarily repressed — i.e. removed from memory, for survival.

Sexual abuse seldom occurs in isolation. A child who is sexually abused is also neglected and/or abused physically and/or emotionally since infancy. As a result she fails to experience secure attachment, necessary for exploration of the environment, learning of self-nurturing attitude and behaviour and a positive self-regard. And insecure child is needy for affection, thus being vulnerable to abuse. An insecure child also does not learn and have access to protective behaviour in the presence of adversaries, nor does she have in her repertoire, responses appropriate for non-abusive interactions. This leads her to abusive persons. An insecure child, by necessity, develops coquettish and other forms of manipulative or attention-seeking behaviour, which repulses non-abusive people and attracts abusive people; thus reinforcing the low self-esteem and the feeling of powerlessness. In other words, the child victim grows up with a victim position or life script, and with an internal working model of the world as invariably abusive. Consequently,

adult survivors of child sexual abuse expect to be abused; this is the norm.

Thus, the long-term effects of child sexual abuse are serious. The victim's life script, the unresolved emotions, such as anger, sadness, fear, along with their correlated cognitive distortions, etc., affect the victim's inter-personal life and make her isolated. Inconsistent cognitive development with its consequent limited personal professional skills development leads to frustrations and lack of self-fulfilment. The foundation therefore is laid in the victim's childhood sexual abuse for minor to major psychopathology in later life. The literature provides significant evidence of correlations between child sexual abuse and later life depression, prostitution, and poor child protection practices in women, and borderline personality, violence, child abuse practices, in male survivors of child sexual abuse.

Intervention ...
... With the Child Victim: The victim's first need is to be believed, and for the abuse to stop. (In cases where it is ongoing, she needs to know that she has the right to be safe, and to develop as a child, and not as a surrogate adult. For this to be achieved, firstly, the perpetra-

tor needs to be removed or stopped from having access to the victim alone. Secondly, the victim needs to hear from adults, and ideally, from the perpetrator, that the abuse was not her fault, and that it should not have taken place. Thirdly, the victim needs to be able to grieve over the betrayal of trust, absence of safety and protection, and the loss of childhood innocence. She also needs to be able to grieve for the absence of a psychologically available mother, or primary care-giver, the availability of whom is every infant's basic need and right. This needs to be facilitated at a professional level. Professionals need to be comfortable with such topics as sex and abuse. They also need to be aware of and be experienced in the normal grieving process (the five stages the process goes through) and the tasks a grieving individual need to accomplish at each stage before being

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able to move on to the next stage.

The age of the victim, the frequency of the abuse, the length of the period the abuse lasted before discovery, etc., will determine the length of the healing period. Resolution is limited by the child's stage of cognitive development: A child can resolve the abuse only a little at each developmental phase. Therefore therapeutic intervention needs to be revisited at each developmental stage.

Contact with the perpetrator (in cases of inter-familial abuse) needs to be limited and supervised. This is not only for prevention of recurrence, but also for prevention of the abuser attempting to attribute the blame onto the victim, and/or seeking forgiveness prematurely for the victim's stage of growing and resolution of the abuse. So often the victim retracts her story after the perpetrator has been charged. This is because the offender emotionally blackmails the victim; the mother gets upset because her family has broken up, and she blames the victim for it. This retraction is known as the accommodation

but that he can learn to identify the early signs of abusive impulses, and learn strategies to control the acting out of the impulses. In many states in the US therapeutic undertaking by the offender is made mandatory and is ordered by court. Without therapeutic intervention, punishment alone has little value; upon release the perpetrator offends again.

Personality disorders are incurable. Personality develops as the child grows. The child learns basic skills of survival in the first five years of her life which the developing brain accommodates and assimilates with its growing neurological fibres and connections. Most of these skills become unconscious and automatic. The child internalized moral values in these early years, in the context of the care-giver child relationship. Deficits in basic values and skills in early childhood form a part of the total personality structure of the grown adult. The adult can learn certain new skills provided they fall within the basic general neurological structure already formed. A grown Bangladeshi can learn to speak English, but can only speak it like a Bangladeshi, and not as an Englishman. He will also need many rehearsals of the new language in order to reduce the conscious effort. At the same time, under stressful conditions, the person is likely to speak his mother tongue first, and will access the new language only when able to exert some effort at a conscious level.

Similarly with personality deficits.

Intervention with personality disordered persons is very difficult. He does not feel the need for it, because he does not think that there is anything wrong with him. He is functional in society even if at a basic level. Highly intellectually endowed persons functions very well in some area. To these people social prohibitions are merely external and unreasonable restrictions. He will comply with social sanctions so long as he thinks he will be appreciated and punished otherwise. A man with average intelligence will also find ways of avoiding apprehension: one of them being, buying silence of the victim with positive reinforcement or threats. Thus, without motivation for change, the personality disordered person is very difficult to engage in therapy, even if he attends regularly, under court order. The highly intelligent ones can fool their therapists and procure clearance: thus we read about the rapists, the paedophiles, the murderers, etc., who get released and reopened.

Prevention of sexual abuse requires major social and political reform. It requires research and community education. It involves major shifts in public interest; public awareness and understanding of the needs of children and of the damaging effects of neglect and abuse;

syndrome. The victim feels responsible for the family, and retracts her allegations. In a way this is one of the ways victims attempt to overcome their sense of powerlessness; being responsible for the family's fate gives them a false sense of power. The victim needs help to learn that she is not responsible for the behaviour and fate of others. She also needs therapeutic intervention aimed at developing a positive self-esteem and confidence in her ability; and for interpersonal, and professional skills, as she grows.

... With the Perpetrator: The perpetrator of child sexual abuse needs, first of all, to face the consequences of his behaviour. He needs to be confronted and charged, for violation of trust, where this is the case, violation of a child's right not to engage in age-inappropriate acts for abuse of a child's helplessness, and for causing trauma to another human being. He needs to be told that he is responsible for his own behaviour, that no circumstances can excuse his action, and that he needs therapy. He needs to be told that he has a personality disorder which will not cure.

Intervention with perpetrator therefore can only be attempted with the above limitations in mind and with realistic plans on the part of authorities for maintaining vigilance.

As far as actual therapy with perpetrator goes, it needs to be educational and consequence-oriented. The offender first of all is taught to acknowledge responsibility over his behaviour and the harm caused by it to the victim. He is taught to offer a formal apology to the victim without making direct or indirect attempts to manipulate her to absolve him of guilt and/or responsibility for the abuse. He is given information about personality development with special emphasis on the effect of childhood neglect and abuse. He is told he probably suffered some of these conditions in his own childhood, which probably interacted with his innate tendencies to create the deficits in his personality which are associated with (but do not cause) his offending. However, that does not mean that he can be set free without society taking steps to protect itself. The offender therefore is taught to recognize his feelings and thoughts that precede his of-

fending behaviour, and is helped to come up with socially acceptable ways of controlling his offending actions and with socially acceptable alternative ways of meeting the needs that produce the thoughts and feelings that had led to abuse. Such offenders, upon release, should be required to continue with regular consultation with the therapist, and to regular reporting to legal authorities. They should also be restricted from having access to vulnerable children and adults.

Prevention

Prevention of sexual abuse requires major social and political reform. It requires research and community education. It involves major shifts in public interest; public awareness and understanding of the needs of children and of the damaging effects of neglect and abuse; change in attitude towards children and other vulnerable members of society; training in nurturing and responsive child rearing practices, and in stress management. There needs to be a major shift in prioritizing resource allocation. Child protection acts need to be developed and implemented. Reporting of any form of abuse and neglect needs to be made mandatory.

Children need to be taught protective behaviours and helped to identify person/s in their lives whom they can trust and approach for protection. Teachers should receive training in identifying the vulnerable and the abused child, and in facilitating disclosure from her. The legal and law enforcement professions need to develop understanding of the long-term damaging effects of childhood trauma, and lawyers need to learn to be less mercenary and adversarial.

Parents should be encouraged to use birth control and to have sufficient gaps in between the births of the few, so that each child has the opportunity for secure attachment experiences. Parents should also be encouraged to seek help with difficult infants.

Money needs to be available from the government fund to supplement the income of families so that the primary care-giver of an infant can stay home and provide...at care at least for the first three years of the infant's life, and or so that adequate child care arrangements can be made when the primary care-giver returns to the work force. Money also needs to be allocated for the establishment of safe and effective child care centres.

Lastly, money should be available for training of therapeutic professionals and for the establishment of publicly-funded therapeutic centres for helping in maternal depression or other psychological problems in the primary care-givers. The community's role is to develop support groups for parents, and safe houses for children. It also has the responsibility to mobilize community education, and to lobby with the social power structure to mobilize economic and legal reforms.

Conclusions

The intervention and preventive steps outlined above are likely to be a tall order, especially for an underdeveloped country like Bangladesh. Even in developed countries the economic imbalance which is unlikely to be redressed, or removed, is inconsistent with the equal power structure required to address the needs of the child. The democratic rights of every individual, including those of criminals, in a democratic society, also interfere with the protection of the vulnerable. Money can buy the required legal representation at the expense of justice. Similarly, the competitive legal games are often played at a cost to the weaker members of the community.

Many other arguments can be presented to prove the difficulty, nay, the impossibility, of making the tremendous amount of modifications required in the social and economic structures to prevent and intervene effectively in child sexual abuse. However, it is human nature to dream and hope, to develop and progress, make some impact on others, however, small.

The writer is senior child psychologist, division of Family and Community Service (FACS), Department of Human Services, government of South Australia.

Metropolitan

Zinc, Vitamin A can amply reduce malnutrition from Bangladesh

By Staff Correspondent

Scientists and doctors at a seminar yesterday said that micronutrients including Zinc and Vitamin A could significantly help reduce malnutrition from Bangladesh as low-cost solution.

Zinc supplement, which is available in direct form as well as in different food types, can improve growth, immunity and appetite in undernourished children if applied properly, said Associate Professor of Dhaka Shishu Hospital (DSH) Dr Salim Shakur at a seminar on "Micronutrients in Malnutrition" at the DSH auditorium.

Referring to his own study at the DSH, Dr Shakur said that Zinc improved immunity in children against infections like pneumonia and diarrhoea. Jointly organised by Bangladesh Institute of Child Health and the DSH, the semi-

nar was attended by a large number of doctors and scientists who have been conducting research on micronutrients.

Associate professor of DSH Dr Salim Shakur and Dr Abul Kashem Sarkar presented key note papers on various properties and supplementation of micronutrients to eradicate malnutrition.

Presided over by the Academic Director of BICH, the seminar was attended by Prof M S Akbar MP as chief guest while Director of DSH Prof Manzoor Hussain gave the address of welcome.

Pointing to his research, Prof Salim Shakur said that children with malnutrition and pneumonia had low zinc in their blood and scalp hair than healthy children. "Vitamin A not only helps in preventing blindness due to Vitamin A de-

fiency from which 30,000 become blind every year, but also has the property of anti-infection," Prof Shakur said.

"It is useful in infection from measles, malaria, pneumonia and chronic diarrhoea," he added.

Dr Abul Kashem Sarkar cautioned that higher dose of Zinc was associated with increased mortality in malnourished children though it can help increasing both weight and height of children.

Emphasising on scientific child care system, Prof M S Akbar said that malnutrition can truly be eradicated if the country can be relieved of poverty and ignorance.

The seminar was organised as part of the on-going observance of the National Nutrition Week.

Dismal situation prevailing at MDC Model Instt

A dismal situation has been prevailing at MDC Model Institute at Mirpur in the city due to "illegal" interference by a few members of the managing committee of the school, reports UNB.

Students and guardians alleged that the "vested interest group" not only ousted the headmaster and the shift-in-charge of the school, but also is issuing "so-called" show cause notices upon other teachers frequently.

They further alleged that the members of the managing committee, whose activities are supposed to remain inactive following a stay order of the court, are also misappropriating the funds of the school.

"Even, they also grabbed the lion's share of what sanctioned for food for work programme to fill-up the school ground," said a senior student. He informed that 25 tons of wheat was allocated for the project, but only 30 to 40 trucks of soil were fallen at the ground.

According to the students and guardians, the "group" dismissed the shift-in-charge Joyeuddin and later suspended the headmaster Kazi Mohibur Rahman bringing various "fictitious" allegations against them.

Both of them got court orders staying the dismissal and suspension. But the "influential" people didn't allow them to go to the school and discharge their duties until the court makes a final verdict.

Local people said Joyeuddin had been discharging the responsibilities of the shift-in-charge for the last 14 years while the headmaster, Kazi Mohibur Rahman since establishment of the school in 1979. Mohibur was received a national award in 1985.

Obituary

Former engineer of Public Health Engineering Directorate and Chittagong WASA Moulavi Abdul Latif died of heart attack at the CMH in the city on Monday. He was 80, says a press release.

Namaj-e-Janajla of Latif will be held today after Asr prayers at his 96, Uttar Jatrabari residence in the city. The qulshwani will be held on May 1 at his residence in the city's Jatrabari area too.

Contribution of Mohiuddin Ahmed recalled

Speakers at a memorial meeting in the city yesterday recalled the contribution of Mohiuddin Ahmed, the veteran parliamentarian, politician and great humanist, and expressed the hope that the present day youths would be imbued with his ideals to present an exploitation-free Bangladesh, the dream of late leader, reports BSS.

Mohiuddin Ahmed, a politician with the exceptional quality of honesty, straight forwardness and love for people is a rarity in now-a-days politics, said the speakers who included ministers, his political associates and intellectuals.

The first death anniversary of Ahmed which passed a fortnight ago was formally observed yesterday at the National Museum through holding a memorial meeting under the auspices of Mohiuddin Ahmed Jatiya Smriti Sangsad.

Chaired by Prof Anisuzzaman, president of the Sangsad, the meeting was addressed by Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, Forest and Environment Minister Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Water Resources Minister Abdur Razzak and Bazur Rahman, Executive Editor, Daily Sangbad.

Monem Sarkar, member, Awami League Central Committee, read out at article dwelling on the illustrious life of Ahmed. Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, paying tributes to his late friend, said he (Ahmed) was a man of indomitable courage

Thai envoy meets Home Minister

Thai Ambassador to Dhaka Pithan Pookman yesterday called on Home Minister Major (Retd) Rafiqul Islam, at his office in the city, reports BSS.

They exchanged views on bilateral issues. They also expressed the hope that the existing friendly relations between the two countries will be strengthened further in future.

Labour, Manpower Ministry meet held

The Tri-partite Consultative Committee of Labour and Manpower Ministry has decided to ratify the ILO Convention relating to the appointment of seamen, reports UNB.

The decision was taken at a meeting of the TCC at the conference room of Manpower, Employment and Training Bureau at Kakrail in the city yesterday. Labour and Manpower Minister M A Mannan presided over the meeting.

The meeting discussed on ratification of the ILO Convention 178, 179, 180, supplementary protocol 1976 to Merchant Shipping (minimum standard) and the instrument adopted at the International Labour Conference in June 1997 to amend the ILO constitution.

It observed one-minute silence in memory of Protapuddin Ahmed, an elderly member of the TCC and general secretary of Bangladesh Trade Union Sangha and Bangladesh Nour Ja Samik Federation, who died few months ago, said a press release.

JP units urged to observe May Day

Jatiya Party Secretary General Nazimul Rahman Manju on Monday urged all JP units to observe the great May Day in a befitting manner through holding discussions and rallies, a JP press release said here, reports BSS.

Seminar on fisheries begins in Khulna

KHULNA, Apr 28: A day-long national seminar on "Fisheries Resources of Bangladesh with Particular Reference to South-western Region and the Role of Khulna University in its Development" was held at the university academic building today, reports UNB.

Vice Chancellor Prof Dr S M Nazrul Islam inaugurated the seminar as chief guest. Prof Dr Saifuddin Shah presided.

Among others, former VC of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) Prof Dr A K M Aminul Hoque, Director of Institute of Marine Science of Chittagong University Prof M A Matin, Prof of Fisheries Department of BAU Dr Aminul Islam and Treasurer of Khulna University A Razaqur Sardar addressed.