

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: When home is not a safe place

Sexual abuse can be the most traumatising experience a child has to go through. The memory of how helpless they felt, to be too young to raise their voices haunts them for the rest of their lives; it affects them negatively in the short and long terms. It is a common misconception that a child can be sexually harassed only by a stranger. The words 'home' and 'family' might not be as safe as they sound because sexual abuse starts at home, and most often, from a person children know and trust.

In a conversation with Laila Khondkar, an international development worker, we got some valuable insights on child sexual abuse that occurs within the family.

THE CURRENT SCENARIO

INCIDIN Bangladesh and Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) revealed in a survey titled 'Violence against children in Bangladesh' (May 2020-June 2021), that 55 per cent of the children are being sexually harassed by their families, out of which, boys are more likely to be the victims than girls with the figures being 60 and 50 per cent respectively.

Among these child victims, 61.7 per cent did not inform their parents or guardians because of shame and fear,

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and 52.7 percent did not realise at the time that they were being sexually harassed as they were too young to comprehend the gravity of the situation.

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RESPONSIBILITIES OF PARENTS

Laila Khondkar emphasises on the responsibilities of parents to protect their children from sexual abuse. According to her, parents need to be very careful that a child is not alone with anyone except parents and

siblings, may it be a very close relative or anybody they trust.

Moreover, they also need to be vigilant about any changes in behaviour like lack of appetite, sleeplessness, mood changes, violent behaviours, etc. which might indicate that the child is experiencing some problems in his/her life. Parents should observe if the child wants to avoid a particular person, find out the reason and must not force the child to interact with him/her.

Khondkar further makes it clear by saying – "Parents should not prompt the child to cuddle, kiss, or sit on relatives' and friends' laps. Instead, they should ask if this is something s/he would like to do. A healthy parent-child relationship is crucial for preventing child sexual abuse."

The relationship between a parent and a child should be friendly enough that the child does not hesitate to talk about anything making him/her uncomfortable, whether it be an inappropriate touch or something someone said. If a child is intimidated by his/her parents and does not have enough faith in them, the child will never be able to speak about the abuse and hence receive no help. Parents must also inform their children that they have the right to say 'no' if someone does or wants to do something with their body that they do not want, even if it is someone they like.

We live in a society where the typical response of people after a sexual harassment case is victim-blaming. We love to character assassinate the victims and blame them to the point that even they start to question themselves. This can be worse when it comes to children because they may not be matured enough to understand the situation and the society's truth becomes theirs. Therefore, the first thing that parents must do after hearing about the abuse is to make their children understand that they did nothing wrong and it is the abuser who is to be blamed for what happened.

"They must listen to the child with attention, trust the child, control their own emotions, and should not support the perpetrators."

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