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CHILD ABUSE: NEED TO LOOK UPON

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ABSTRACT

Abuse can be defined as a state of physical, emotional, economic and sexual maltreatment given to a person. Child abuse pertains to such maltreatment to a person below 18 years of age. An estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence involving physical contact. In 2007, Ministry of Women and Child Development published a study depicting a prevalence of child abuse as 53%. Child abuse is associated with many chronic conditions and there is a strong association of exposure to child abuse to such conditions. The primary responsibility of protecting children from abuse lies with the families or the primary caregivers. However, other stakeholders such as communities and civil society are also responsible for the care and protection of children. School based curriculum for personal safety, sensitization and skill building programs, advocacy and awareness by media, counseling and support services to street children can prevent the children from being abused.

Key Words: *Child abuse, Maltreatment, Sexual assault, Sensitization, Counseling*

INTRODUCTION

Abuse can be defined as a state of physical, emotional, economic and sexual maltreatment given to a person. Child abuse pertains to such maltreatment to a person below 18 years of age. WHO defines abuse in 4 domains which are:

1. **Physical Abuse:** It is the inflicting of physical injury upon a child. This may include burning, hitting, punching, shaking, kicking, beating or otherwise harming a child. The parent or caretaker may not have intended to hurt the child. It may, however, be the result of over-discipline or physical punishment that is inappropriate to the child's age.
2. **Sexual Abuse:** Inappropriate sexual behavior with a child. It includes fondling a child's genitals, making the child fondle the adult's genitals, intercourse, incest, rape, sodomy, exhibitionism and sexual exploitation. To be considered 'child abuse', these acts have to be committed by a person responsible for the care of a child, or related to the child.
3. **Emotional Abuse:** Also known as verbal abuse, mental abuse, and psychological maltreatment. It includes acts or the failures to act by parents or caretakers that have caused or could cause, serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental trauma. This can include parents/caretakers using extreme and/or bizarre forms of punishment, such as confinement in a dark room or being tied to a chair for long periods of time or threatening or terrorizing a child. Other less severe acts, but no less damaging, are belittling or rejecting treatment, using derogatory terms to describe the child, habitual tendency to blame the child or make him/her a scapegoat etc.
4. **Neglect:** It is the failure to provide for the child's basic needs. Neglect can be physical, educational, or emotional. Physical neglect can include not providing adequate food or clothing, appropriate medical care, supervision, or proper weather protection (heat or cold). It may include abandonment. Educational neglect includes failure to provide appropriate schooling or special educational needs, allowing excessive trancies. Psychological neglect includes the lack of any emotional support and love, never attending to the child, substance abuse including allowing the child to participate in drug and alcohol use (Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention, 1999).

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Prevalence

WHO estimates for the year 2002 revealed that almost 53,000 child deaths were homicides. For the same year, the rate of homicide of children was twice as high in low-income countries than high-income countries (2.58 versus 1.21 per 100,000 populations). An estimated 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence involving physical contact. Only 2.4% of the world's children are legally protected from corporal punishment in all settings (Pinheiro PS, 2006).

A meta-analysis of 65 research studies spanning 22 countries published in 2009 estimated that 7.9% of men and 19.7% of women globally experienced sexual abuse prior to the age of 18. The highest prevalence rate of child sexual abuse geographically was found in Africa (34.4%). Europe showed the lowest prevalence rate (9.2%). America and Asia had prevalence rates between 10.1% and 23.9% (Pereda et al., 2009).

In India in the year 2007, Ministry of Women and Child Development published the "Study on Child Abuse: India 2007" covering 12447 children, 13 states with 5 evidence groups. It looked at different forms of child abuse: physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse and girl child neglect. The study's main findings depicted that 53.22% of children reported having faced sexual abuse. Among them 52.94% were boys and 47.06% girls. Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar and Delhi reported the highest percentage of sexual abuse among both boys and girls, as well as the highest incidence of sexual assaults. 21.90% of child respondents faced severe forms of sexual abuse, 5.69% had been sexually assaulted and 50.76% reported other forms of sexual abuse. The study also reported that 50% of abusers are known to the child or are in a position of trust and responsibility and most children had not reported the matter to anyone (Kacker et al., 2007).

Consequences of Child Abuse

Child abuse is associated with many chronic conditions and there is a strong association of exposure to child abuse to such conditions. The outcome of maltreatment depends on a number of factors which includes (a) The age and developmental status of child at the time of abuse (b) Frequency, duration and severity of maltreatment (c) Type of maltreatment and (d) Relation to the perpetrator.

The health consequences of child abuse can be classified into:

1. Physical health consequences- bruises, broken bones, abusive head trauma, impaired brain development, poor physical health
2. Psychological consequences- isolation, fear, inability to trust, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, cognitive difficulties, development of anti-social traits
3. Behavioral consequences- abusive behavior, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality, substance abuse.
4. Societal consequences- direct and indirect costs including employment problems, financial problems and absenteeism (Long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect, 2013).

Laws to Curb Child Abuse

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in its articles 34 and 35 says that government should protect the children from all forms of sexual exploitation which includes outlawing the coercion of a child to perform sexual activity, the prostitution of children, and the exploitation of children in creating pornography. The states are also required to take all possible measure to ensure children are not abducted, sold or trafficked. This treaty is ratified by all member states of United Nations including India except United States and Somalia.

In 2012, the Parliament of India passed the 'Protection of Children against Sexual Offences Bill, 2011' regarding child sexual abuse into Act (The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012). The highlights of this act are:

1. The act defines a child as any person below 18 years of age and provides protection from the offences of sexual assault, sexual harassment and pornography.

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2. Child friendly procedures for reporting, recording of evidence, investigation and trial of offences have been incorporated in the Act.
3. The burden of proof is shifted on the accused for the more heinous offences of Penetrative Sexual Assault, Aggravated Penetrative Sexual Assault, Sexual Assault and Aggravated Sexual Assault.
4. The disclosure of the identity of the child without the permission of the Special Court has been barred. Before the bill was passed by the Parliament of India, the cases of child sexual offences were dealt with Indian Penal Code (IPC) under various sections.

Strategies for Prevention

The primary responsibility of protecting children from abuse lies with the families or the primary caregivers. However, other stakeholders such as communities and civil society are also responsible for the care and protection of children. The overarching responsibility is that of the state and it is the state that has to create a protective environment and provide a safety net for children who are vulnerable and in exploitative situations.

1. School based curriculum for personal safety among school students is a method to empower the children. The children should be given knowledge about safe and unsafe touch and should be enabled to make decision.
2. Sensitization and skill building programs for parents and family members, school teachers, social workers, doctors and other stakeholders should be held in order to meet the needs of knowledge and equipping them with skills to effectively prevent and respond to child abuse.
3. Awareness and advocacy by media should be used to highlight the child rights and the prevalence of child abuse. Child protection issues should be taken up by media to increase people's knowledge and sensitivity.
4. Counseling and treatment of the abused children should be done since abuse and trauma faced by the poor child leads to chronic conditions such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder etc. Medical counseling, psychotherapy and legal support should be provided so as to prevent the vicious cycle of being abused to being abusive.
5. Support services to children onto the streets who have been surviving through begging, working and rag picking. Such children should be given education and vocational skills to get them rehabilitated and thereby reducing their vulnerability to child abuse.

Child abuse is a global problem which is deeply rooted in social, cultural and economic milieu. Much can be done to reduce/prevent the problem of child abuse at the societal level through individual, community and state support for the upliftment of child rights and well-being.

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