

An Empirical Assessment of Child Abuse and its Implications among Young Adults in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The available literature on child abuse apparently conveys that victims of child abuse are gender-neutral. Physical abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect are the major forms of abuse faced by child victims. Cases of prolonged child abuse are found to have a connection with lifelong impacts on those victims. On the other hand, victimization of child abuse is not sufficiently reported corresponding to the actual number of occurrences due to several reasons. Hence, the researchers of the present study focus on understanding the magnitude and extent of different forms of child abuse, the reasons for the non-reporting behavior of its victims, and to explore the impacts of victimization of child abuse among its adult victims. Kerala, the state which tops in Human Development Index was chosen for the study. A convenient sampling method was used to reach the samples. A link for a briefly constructed 'Google form' was sent to the participants through Email, WhatsApp groups and Instagram to elicit the responses from the respondents. 150 participants aged 18-25 years are included in the sample size which covers all the districts of Kerala. Analysis of the result shows that more than one-fourth of respondents have faced at least one form of abuse during their childhood. Psychological impacts are found to be common with the victims. Though government efforts are appreciable, increased surveillance by the government is mandatory to get every such case reported and immediate actions are to be taken. Consistent awareness and training should be given by the experts to children, parents, teachers and law enforcement officers to prevent and deal with child abuse.

Keywords: Child Abuse, Young Adults, Victims, Impact, Victimization.

Introduction

Any intentional harm or mistreatment to a child who comes under 18 years of age is called Child Abuse. Child abuse can be physical, emotional/psychological, sexual, and neglect. The Children who are getting abused are not in a mature position to report their victimization to the authorities. In certain cases, for example, child sexual abuse by others, parents or guardians are not willing to report their ward's sexual abuse due to social stigma. On the other hand, most of the children who face some kind of abuse are not aware that they are facing abuse. It happens because of a lack of awareness of the children. The literature reviews mostly focus on child sexual abuse and it shows that the female victims are more (Asscher et al., 2015). Child abusers are of different types such as parents, grandparents, step-parents, neighbors, family friends, senior students, bus drivers, taxi drivers, relatives, etc. Most commonly people have a common opinion that only the girl child is getting abused and also that child abuse only means child sexual abuse. But the fact is that the gender of the child doesn't matter for getting abused, all children are vulnerable irrespective of gender and child abuse means not only sexual abuse. The main loophole regarding child abuse is most of the incidents stay as dark figures of victimization. Hence the actual data regarding child abuse is not available. Lack of proper care and protection is the main cause of

child abuse. Rufus & Beulah(2009) in their research article published years back stressed that child abuse is a major evil that has been becoming a very serious problem in India and worldwide. They also expressed their concern that child abuse affects the child's physical and personality development. Thus, a wide array of recommendations was given by them to the policymakers, media, school teachers, NGOs, Criminal Justice professionals, etc. to effectively deal with this problem.

The present study particularly focuses on understanding whether the present young adults had been affected by any kind of child abuse during their childhood in Kerala. The participants are selected randomly by sending the Google form questionnaire through social media, hence there are representatives from all the districts of Kerala.

The common forms of child abuse are as follows:

- **Physical Abuse:** When a child is physically injured or harmed by any person intentionally or unintentionally is called Physical Abuse.
- Eg: Beating, Burning, etc.
- **Emotional or Psychological Abuse:** It means injuring the child's self-esteem or emotional well-being. It can be verbal or emotional abuse such as continually berating a child as well as isolating, rejecting, or ignoring, etc.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Any kind of sexual activity with a child is called Child Sexual Abuse. It can involve sexual contact such as intentional sexual touching (including private part), oral and genital contact, or intercourse. It can also involve noncontact child sexual abuse such as sexual talking, exposing a child to sexual activity or pornography, observing or filming a child sexually, sex trafficking, etc.
- **Neglect:** Child neglect is failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, clean living conditions, affection, medical care etc. ("Child abuse - Symptoms and causes" 2022).

Literature Review

A study was done on the "**Impact of Child Sexual Abuse and Neglect Victimization Among Adults By Analyzing Their Lifetime Measures of Mental Health**"(Horwitz et al., 2001). The samples were collected from those who were already victimized 20 years ago. The data were collected from 641 victims and 510 non-victims and comparisons were made in the study. One of the major results obtained was that the men who got abused during their childhood had dysthymia and antisocial personality disorder and alcohol problems than the control group.

The outcome of a research conducted by Madras Medical College doctors on "**Abuse Faced by Girl Students of Government Schools**"(TNN / Updated: Aug 10), shows that 1 in 10 girl students faced abuse and at least 5% of them faced sexual abuse from their father, friend, neighbor or relative. Most of child abuse victims are abused by their parents, relatives and known people.

A paper on "**Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review**"(Tener and Murphy, 2014)reports that adults who were sexually abused as children still suffers with the trauma. Choosing to report or keep the abuse a secret is one of the decisions victims must make as adults. Although a child's earlier disclosure may have an impact on adult disclosure, adult survivors confront fresh obstacles and conundrums over who, when, and how to inform. This article's goal is to evaluate the areas covered in the literature on survivors' experiences with disclosing childhood sexual abuse as adults, which were all written between 1980 and 2013. The choice to reveal as an adult, the obstacles and enablers to disclosure, prospective receivers of the disclosure, the act of telling and its effects on the well-being of survivors are among the domains.

"**Prevalence of child abuse in Kerala, India: An ICAST-CH based survey**" (Kumar et al., 2019)a cross-sectional survey was done among 6957 adolescents from randomly selected schools in a city of Kerala. The study found that child maltreatment was widespread, Physical and Emotional Abuse were common and sexual abuse was least common. By gender, boys were more likely than girls to report being abused, including sexual abuse.

Statement of Problem

Recent studies and crime status show that incidences of abuse against children are rapidly increasing. It is significant to know that 2,33,445 cases are pending trial at the end of the year 2022

(NCRB,2022) under the POCSO Act. Many researchers proved that child abuse has caused psychological trauma to the victims which affects their different stages of growth and development. Thus, understanding the types of abuse and impacts of abuse in any society becomes imperative.

Objectives of the Study

- To find out the extent of child abuse through the experiences shared by the adults.
- To understand the nature of abuse and its magnitude through the experiences of the adults during their childhood.
- To study a brief profile of the perpetrators of child abuse.
- To analyze the factors that facilitated the child abuse incidences.

Research Questions

- What is the frequency of different types of child abuse faced by adults?
- Why didn't the victims report their victimization?
- What are the impacts faced by the victims of child abuse?

Methodology

150 samples were selected from college-going students (only 18-25 years age group) who were born and brought up in Kerala using convenient sampling techniques. A link for a self-reporting structured Google forms(questionnaires) was shared through social media such as WhatsApp and Instagram. The questionnaire contained majorly closed-ended questions; a few open-ended questions were also used to collect the descriptive nature of responses. The responses received in Excel sheets using Google Forms were also converted into SPSS files and analyzed. The results are reported in the form of tables and charts. The reference period of the research data collection was October 2023.

Operational Definitions

- **Young Adults:** The term young adults used in the study refers to the college-going students who were in the age category of 18-25 years old during the data collection.
- **Victims:** The term 'Victims' refers only to the respondents of this study who had experienced any form of abuse during their childhood.
- **Victimisation:** For this study, the term 'victimization' refers to the experience of any form of abuse by the respondents during their childhood.

Limitations

As the study was conducted for a short duration using convenient sampling, only a minimum sample size was achieved. Hence, generalization of the results to the entire young adult population is not possible.

While the data were collected using Google Forms, the email addresses of the respondents were also auto-collected with the declaration that the confidentiality of the data would be maintained. Due to the personal and sensitive nature of such a study, some respondents would have hesitated to report their abuse experience.

Research Ethics

Ethical principles such as Informed consent, assurance of privacy and confidentiality, minimal or no harm to the participants of the study, etc., were strictly followed by the researchers.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The collected data was analyzed using statistical tools such as SPSS software and Excel software and interpretation was done accordingly.

Demographic Details of the Respondents

Basic demographic details were collected from the participants apart from the child victimization details.

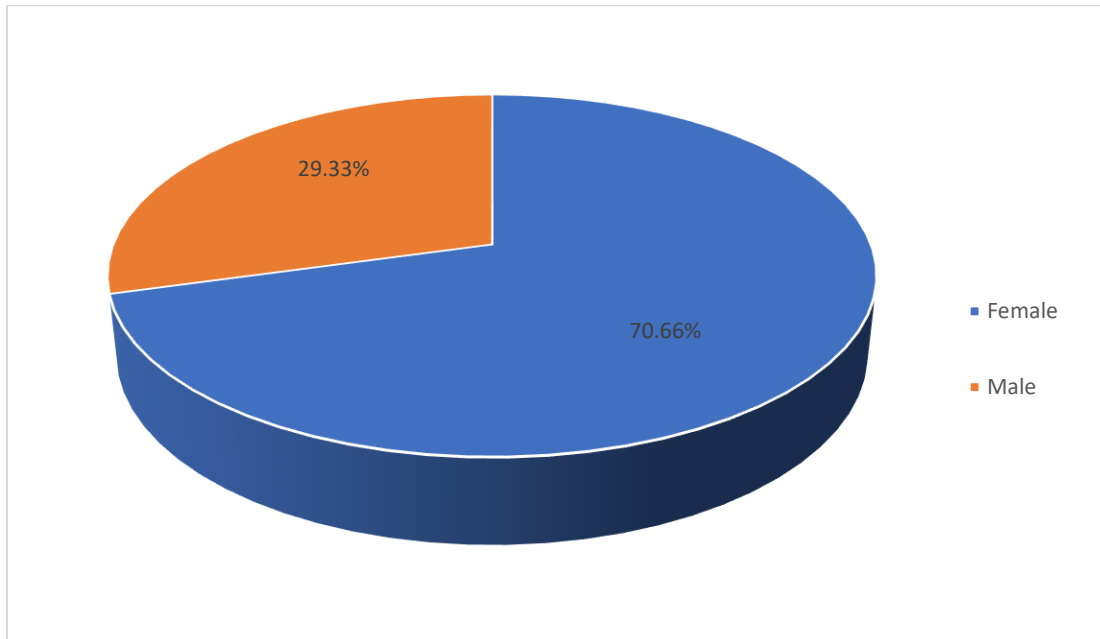


Chart 1: Gender of the Respondents

Source: Primary Data; N=150

The data was sent to the male and female college-going students of Kerala through social media without mentioning the gender specifically. The above chart depicts that the maximum number of respondents (70.66%) are females and approximately 30% of the respondents are males.



Chart 2: Age Group of the Respondents

Source: Primary Data; N=150

The data included the young adult's age ranges from 18 – 25. The age was categorised into 2 groups. Approximately 45% of the participants are from 18 – 21 years of age group and approximately 55% of the participants are in between 22 – 25 years of age.

Hypothesis Test I

- **Null Hypothesis:** There is no association between gender and experience of child abuse

Table 1: Chi-square test for association between Gender and Experience of Child Abuse

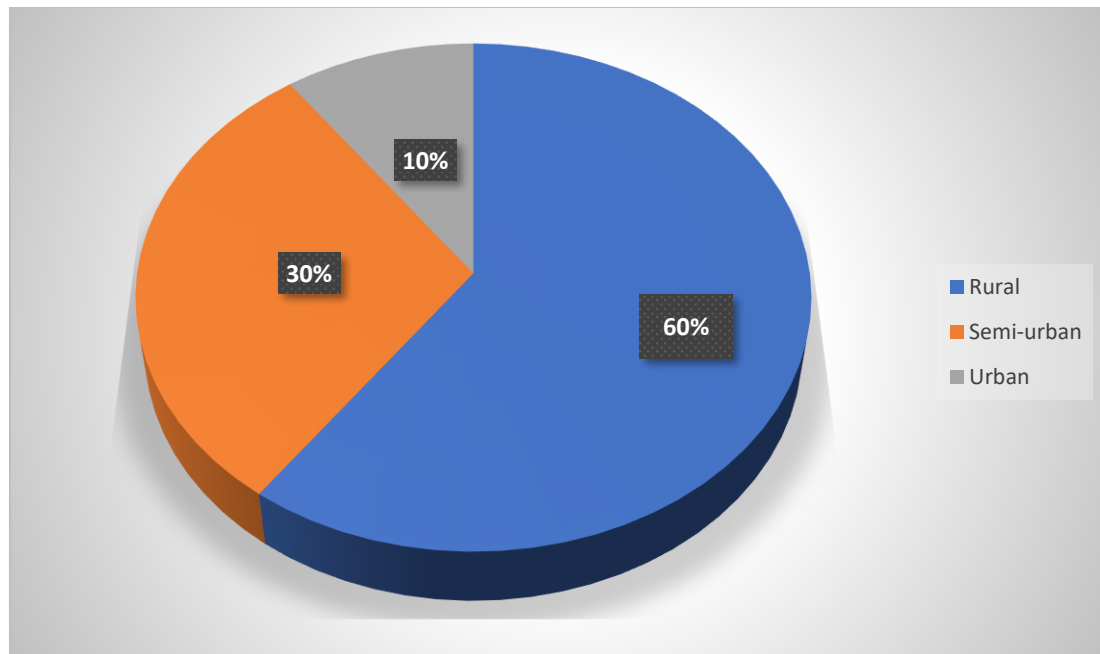
Gender	Experience of Child Abuse			Chi-Square Value	P-Value
	Yes	No	Total		
Male	11 (25) [28.2]	33 (75) [29.7]	44 (100) [29.3]	0.032	0.857
Female	28 (26.4) [71.8]	78 (73.6) [70.3]	106 (100) [70.7]		
Total	39 (26) [100]	111 (74) [100]	150 (100) [100]		

Note: The value within () refers to row Percentage

The value within [] refers to the column percentage

Source: Primary Data (SPSS Outputs of cross-tabulation and Chi-Square Tests were combined in the above table)

The above table represents child abuse victimization by gender. Since the P value for gender in association with the experience of child abuse is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 5% level of significance. Hence it is concluded that there is no association between gender and experience of child abuse. Based on row percentage 25% of male respondents have experienced abuse during their childhood and 26.4% of female participants have experienced child abuse during their childhood. Hence it can be said that there is no association between the variables 'gender' and the 'experience of child abuse'. The child whether male or female faces child abuse equally. (Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2011).

**Chart 3: Residential Location of the Victims during their Victimization**

Source: Primary Data; N=39

It is very clear that nearly one out of every 4 young adult participants of the study were the victims of child abuse. Of those victims, 60% spent their childhood in rural areas, followed by 30% of them spent their childhood in semi-urban areas and only 10% of victims spent their life in the urban area.

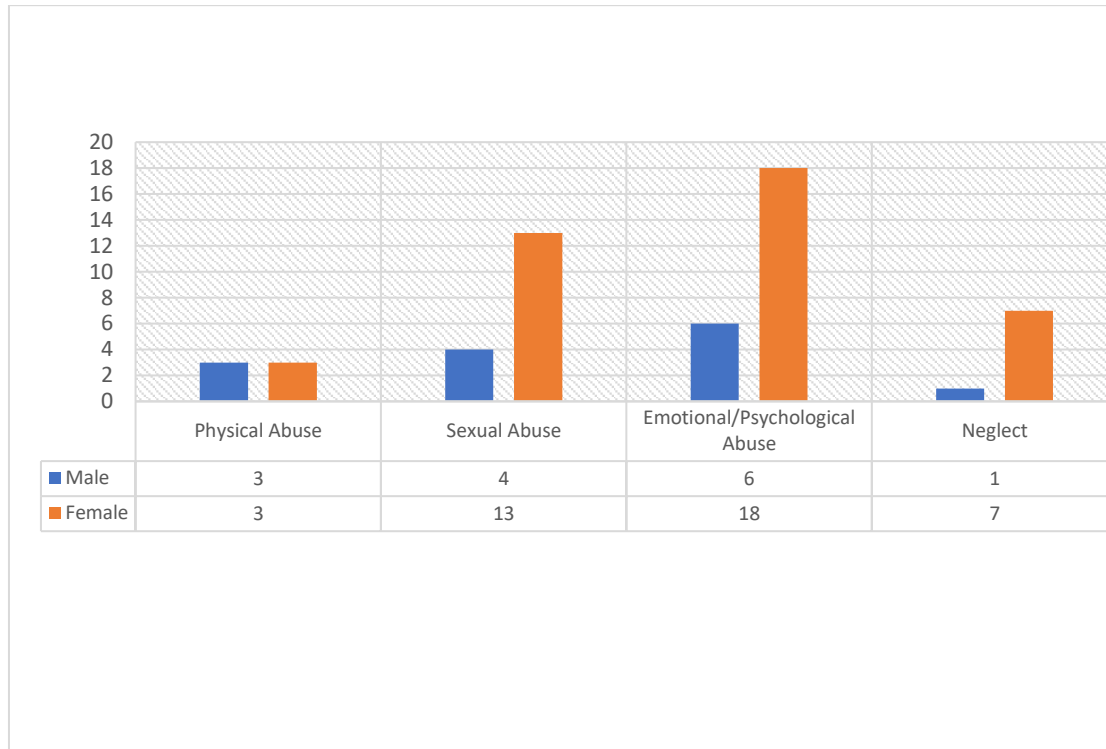


Chart 4: Type of Child Abuse Vs Gender of the Respondents

Source: Primary data; N=39; Multiple responses

The above-given bar diagram shows the result as a type of abuse faced by the victims during their childhood. From the graph, it is clear that a large number (24) of victims are of emotional/psychological abuse. In the case of emotional abuse experiences, 75% of the victims are female, 25% of them are male victims. Only one participant from the other gender category also faced emotional/psychological abuse. The second most reported form of childhood victimization is sexual abuse by 17 respondents. It is evident that the majority of the sexual abuse victims are female (76.4%) and approximately one-fourth of the victims are male (4). The common misconception that males do not be the victims of sexual violence is disproved in the case of child abuse. 7 female and 1 male participant have faced neglect as abuse. The least reported form of abuse is physical abuse which was reported to have been experienced by 7 female and 1 male participants. From the data given above it is clear that child abuse is not gender dependent.

Hypothesis Test II

- **Null Hypothesis:** The mean score of time spent by parents between those who experienced child abuse and those who didn't experience child abuse are equal.

Table 2: T-test for significant difference between those who experienced child abuse and those who didn't experience child abuse with respect to time spent by parents with the participants during their childhood.

	Experience of Child Abuse				t value	P value
	Yes		No			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Time Spent by the Parents with the Participants during Their Childhood	3.72	1.255	4.41	0.779	3.992	0.000

Note: $p < 0.001$, i.e., p is very small

Source: Primary data (SPSS output of group statistics and independent sample test were combinedly presented in the above table)

Since the P value is less than 0.01, the Null hypothesis is rejected at the 1% level. Hence there is a significant difference between those who experience child abuse and those who didn't experience child abuse concerning mean time spent by parents with the participants during their childhood. Based on the mean score, the participants who reported that their parents spent more time during their childhood didn't experience child abuse.

Table 3: Type of Perpetrator vs Type of Child Abuse

Type of Perpetrator	Type of Abuse			
	Sexual Abuse	Physical Abuse	Emotional/ Psychological	Negligence
Known	13	4	15	8
Unknown	7	4	11	0

Source: Primary data; N=39

The above data shows the type of perpetrator involved in each child abuse. From this, it is clear that most of the perpetrators are known. In the case of sexual abuse out of 20 victims 65% of the perpetrators were known persons to the child. When it comes to physical abuse known and unknown perpetrators are in number. In the case of Emotional/Psychological abuse out of 26 victims approximately 60% of the perpetrators were known persons to the children. Comparing all four types of crime negligence to the children was completely done by the known perpetrators to the children, showing that the children are neglected by their loved ones/ known people. A similar finding that the known ones (parents and caregivers) are majorly the perpetrators of child abuse incidence was found in other researchers in their studies (Australia, 2014; Kacker et al., 2007).

Table 4: Relationship of Perpetrators with the Victims of Child Abuse

Perpetrators Category	Frequency	Percentage
Parents	6	15.4
Grand Parents	1	2.6
Siblings/Cousins	5	12.8
Relatives	13	33.3
Neighbours	4	10.3
Family Friends	1	2.6
School Teachers	1	2.6
Taxi/ Auto/ School bus drivers	1	2.6
Unknown People	16	41

Source: Primary data; N=39; Multiple responses

The above table depicts the brief profile of the perpetrators. Coming to the known categories of perpetrators relatives play a major role (33%) in committing child abuse. Followed by parents (15.4%), siblings/cousins (12.8%). Neighbors to the victim's family play 10.3% of the perpetrator's role. Grandparents, Family friends, School teachers, Taxi/Auto/School bus drivers have equally played the role of perpetrators in the present study. Coming to the overall distribution approximately 60% of the perpetrators are known ones to the child victims. 41% of the perpetrators were completely unknown to the victims of child abuse.

- **Unreported Victimization:** From the child abuse cases 55% of cases are unreported. 20% of the victims reported that they didn't share the incident because they were not mature enough to understand the incident during their victimization. And the others are scared to share and they are afraid of getting blamed by others. Only one among the victims was reported to the police through parents and necessary actions were taken. Others were shared with parents and friends and they were asked to ignore and move on. The NCRB data gives the rate of only reported cases but it is clear that the majority of the cases go unreported (Study on Child Abuse, 2007)
- **Psychological Trauma:** All the victims of child abuse have agreed that they faced any one of the psychological traumas such as anger, mood swings and depression for at least a period of time. Approximately 18% of victims had suicidal tendencies and self-harm. 28% of victims had faced psychological trauma for more than a month and even still they are afraid of socialising. Thus, it is proved that the psychological impact of childhood victimization may trouble the victims even after several years of their lives (Scrafford et al., 2017).

Case Studies

Though few respondents attempted open-ended questions to describe their childhood victimization, the following two case studies are presented here considering the clarity of the responses given by the victims of child abuse which explains the nature of child abuse victimization and its impact.

- Case 1:** Riya (name changed) who was 7 years old, had quarrelling parents who neglected her needs due to their conflicts. She was from a nuclear family and her parents were working. The child never used to get love, care, and attention from her parents. This severely affected that child's emotions. The child was missing many childhood events that other children experienced, such as quality time with parents, visits to local parks, meeting grandparents, kind words during her sickness, etc. The lonely child was searching for kindness and care from the outside of the family. Whenever the other people used to show love and affection, she used to like and trust them. Her loneliness was completely taken advantage of by two of her male neighbors among them one was about 19 years and another one was a middle-aged man, as estimated by the victim. Those two neighbors have sexually abused her multiple times in the form of inappropriate bad touches for about two years of duration which were never known by the parents. The child was able to feel something wrong things had been done by those neighbors. However, she was unable to express her victimization to anyone during that period due to fear that those perpetrators would betray her and they would not speak and love her anymore if she shared this with anyone. As expressed by the victim:

"My parents used to fight every day. I wanted to share a lot of things with my parents, but they never gave their time to listen to me. At times I used to go to my neighbor's houses to play, but my parents never stopped me. From there one of my neighbor's brother and uncle used to give me chocolates and ice creams etc., which was never given by my parents. I didn't want to stop those caring given by them. So whenever they used to touch my private parts I used to suppress all my emotions and I never disclosed these things to anyone. Once after my family relocated from that place at my 5th standard I escaped from that abuse."

Thus, the child suppressed her abusive experience within herself. This gradually built a fear in her life to raise her voice against anything. Even during her adult period, she feared raising her voice against wrong things and now she is not able to trust anyone.

This is an example to understand the role of a broken family in leading to child abuse. When the parents are careless about their children and are busy dealing with their egos each other, the children become completely neglected by them. So, it is well established that neglect of the child by parents leads to emotional abuse of that child, also the potential abusers will try to misuse such situations of the child in their favour.

- Case 2:** Anoop (name changed) who was 15 years old, was psychologically abused by one of his teachers by name calling 'Koppalan' which is usually called for his community. The same was later imitated by his classmates. The child used to be very introverted which was misused by his classmates and they started bullying him. They used to take and throw his belongings and used to disturb him a lot. He informed about this to his parents. When his parents pointed this issue to the school administration, no actions were taken by them. This made the child to be scared of everything including going to school. Even after changing the school, the fear didn't go. Instead, it started haunting the child even at night. After growing up too that haunts the victim even now. As expressed by the victim:

"I belong to the community that performs the Hindu cultural art Theyyam kola's, and people call us 'Koppalan' in our area. I hate these kinds of name-calling. During the 9th standard of my schooling, very unexpectedly one of my teachers called me by that name. I used to feel very embarrassed and felt crying. This calling was later taken over by my classmates and they started to tease and bully me. This led me to experience insomnia and I got scared to go to school, even after changing schools also I had the same fear that other people also do the same. Even now I have the same inferiority complex and fear regarding the same."

This case shows a bad impact of psychological abuse on the child by teachers. This happened mainly because of the carelessness and insensitivity of the teachers and the school authorities. School is the place where children learn, develop personality, and start building their careers. When the school fails to provide care and security to the children, the future of the child will be under question.

Major findings of the Study

The research includes 150 adult participants between the age of 18-25 in which 40 of the participants reported victimisation of abuse during their childhood. This shows approximately 3 out of 10 are affected by any type of child abuse. While analyzing the data 70.6% of participants were females out of which 28.30% of them have faced child abuse victimization. Among male respondents, approximately one out of every five respondents (20.9%) have experienced a form of child abuse. The results revealed that among other types a large number of victims have experienced emotional/psychological abuse, in that 75% are female and 25% are male. Sexual abuse is the second largest category of victimization experienced by the respondents. Out of 17 child sexual abuse victims 76.4% are females and the remaining 23.6% are males. 7 females and 1 male faced neglect and 3 of each male and female faced physical abuse victimization. Hypothesis I, the null hypothesis was accepted and the result shows that the child abuse experienced by children is gender independent. 64% of perpetrators involved in the above-mentioned abuses are known persons to the victims which includes parents, family members, neighbors, teachers, etc. Only 36% of the perpetrators were unknown i.e., from public transport, drivers, etc. Hypothesis II, the null hypothesis was rejected at a 1% level of significance shows that quality time spent by parents with their child plays a vital role in preventing children from facing child abuse. Even though child abuse victimization is more but 55% of the incidents were not been reported to anyone. Out of these many cases, only one case was reported to the police and actions were taken. Remaining victimized, the victims shared with their friends and family that most of them tried to comfort them but no actions were taken. Most of the cases were unreported because of the lack of awareness about the abuse, fear of getting victimization, etc. The victims of child abuse faced different kinds of psychological trauma such as depression, anxiety, suicidal tendency, etc., which affected them throughout their life.

Conclusion & Suggestions

The researcher concludes through this study that there are plenty of child abuse cases happening but most of them are not reported. When comparing the total number of respondents from each gender the data shows that even though the female child abuse victims are comparatively more it also says that the male victims are also approximately equal to the female victims (Rufus & Beulah, 2009). Hence it is clear that the child abuse victims are gender independent. But the tragedy is that most of the cases are not getting reported. The crime against children is increasing day by day. In this present scenario, it is very important to report every case and take necessary actions against the offenders.

Through this study, the researcher suggests that proper awareness regarding child abuse should be provided to the children and also self-defense classes should be provided. Counseling should be conducted in the schools at particular intervals of time. The major preventive strategy for child abuse is quality time spent by parents with their children. The judiciary system must make sure that all cases are getting reported and the necessary actions are taken for the sake of reducing child abuse cases. Children are the future of the Country hence assurance of their protection and their justice is the duty of the Society.

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