

Child abuse in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In Bangladesh, a large number of children are deprived of their basic human rights due to unacceptable health, nutrition, education as well as social conditions. In addition, children are exposed to severe forms of sexual, physical and mental abuses at home, in the work place, in institutions and other public places. The nature and extent of violence against children irrespective of age, sex and class has been increasing day by day. These include physical torture, rape, homicide and sometimes heinous attacks with acid. Children are also victims of child labor and trafficking, both of which are treated as the most severe form of child exploitation and child abuse in the world today. This review article is aimed to focus on the present situation of various forms of child abuses in our country. Data collection is based on secondary sources of information from Dhaka Medical College Hospital, One Stop Crisis Center (OCC), UNICEF, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, several Dhaka based organizations and news paper clipping.

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Introduction

Across the globe, children are exposed to different forms of violence that impedes their mental, physical, psychological and moral growth.¹ Child abuse or maltreatment as defined by World Health Organization (1999) constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.² The definition could range wider to include societal forms of violence- the effects of poverty, exploitative child labor, lack of adequate health care and education and non deliberate neglect by the state, parents and others. However, the focus here is on interpersonal violence to children. Article 1 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child defines a child as "Every human being below the age of 18yrs unless, under the law applicable, majority is attained earlier".³ No group of child is immune from being a victim of child abuse, although girls are more often vulnerable of sexual abuse than boys. For all other types of abuse and neglect, statistics are about equal for both boys and girls.

This review article is aimed to present a brief account of violence committed against the children of Bangladesh with regards to patterns, frequency, effects and measures to be taken to reduce child abuse.

Incidence of child abuse

Violence against children is causing increasing concern in Bangladesh as it is not confined to any specific zone. Home, workplace, street, and prisons- everywhere children become easy prey of violence.⁴ A study was conducted in 2005 about crime statistics by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. The study revealed that there were 555 cases of child abuse reported to the police on that particular year. By 2010, this number increased to 1,542 (Table 1). Table 2 shows the scenario of homicide committed on young children over the years till March 2016. These cases are only the reported cases and may not reflect the real situation of child abuse and violence in the country.

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Table-1: Year wise reported cases of child abuse from 2001 to 2010

Year	Total number of reported cases of abused child
2001	380
2002	512
2003	475
2004	503
2005	555
2006	662
2007	967
2008	962
2009	1093
2010	1542

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Govt. of Bangladesh, 2005

The epidemiology of child abuse can be classified into three sub headings- host of abuse, agent of abuse and environment. These are discussed below:

Host of abuse

Children are the most vulnerable members of our society. In recent years, many children have literally no rights of their own, they live with misfortune and are subjected to the most horrible forms of child abuse and exploitation. Their families abandon them when their number in the household reaches past the capability they have to feed them. Poor families sent their children to work at a very young age as domestic workers, factory workers or beggars. Children of poor socio economic status, unemployed parents, young single parents and children having parental conflicts are usually at risk of being the victims of abuse and neglect. If one child in the family is being abused, it is

Table-2: Frequency of child homicide from 2012 to 2016

Year	Total number of children reported murdered
2012	209
2013	218
2014	366
2015	292
2016 (January-March)	49

Source: Bangladesh Shishu Odhikar Forum and national daily (Prothom Alo)

likely that other children are also being treated the same way. In most cases parents and other care givers such as relatives, babysitters and foster parents are often the perpetrators. They either physically abuse their children or severely neglect them in providing their basic needs of food, safe shelter, education and also love, affection and compassion. Child abuse is a vicious cycle where the abused or neglected children will eventually victimize their own children in future.⁵

Agents of child abuse

Child abuse can take several forms. The four main types are physical abuse, psychological abuse, neglect and sexual abuse.

a. Physical abuse: Excessive intentional physical injury to a child as a result of punching, shaking, beating, biting, kicking, burning or otherwise physically harming the child. These include- battered baby syndrome, corporal punishment. When an infant or child suffers repetitive physical injuries inflicted by a parent or guardian in circumstances where accident can be excluded, it is most likely to be regarded as physical abuse. The common physical lesions are in the skin in the form of skin bruising.⁶ Bruising occurs around the limbs and in infants around the ankles. The older child may be gripped by the upper arms in order to be shaken known as Shaken Baby Syndrome that often results in permanent neurological damage in 80% of cases or death in 30% of cases. This sort of abuse in young children of 1-2 yrs may cause important regions of the brain to fail to form or grow properly resulting in impaired development. These alterations in brain maturation have long-term consequences for cognitive, language & academic abilities.⁷

Children are also victims of corporal punishment at educational institutions. Corporal punishment in school refers to intentional application of physical pain as a method of changing behavior of students. Corporal punishment is unlawful in schools of Bangladesh according to a supreme court judgment issued on 13 January 2011.⁸ Despite laws, this type of punishment is widespread in most of the schools of our country. UNICEF & Ministry of Women and Children Affairs jointly carried out a survey on children's opinion on corporal punishment in November 2008.⁹ A total of 3,840 households were sampled, evenly divided among slums, urban, rural, char (river islands) and adivasi (ethnic) areas. The head of each household and one

Table-3: Children receiving physical punishment in different types of educational institution

Educational Institute	Children received physical punishment(%)
Primary schools	92%
NGO school/ Kindergartens/ Technical schools	83%
Madrasa	90%
Higher secondary schools	86%
College	20%

Source: UNICEF & Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (Children's opinion poll, November 2008)

child per household aged 9-18 were interviewed. The survey result is presented below (Table 3).

b. **Psychological abuse:** It includes repeated verbal abuse of a child in the form of shouting, threats, confinement and degrading or humiliating criticism. Early marriage is one type of extreme physical and mental abuse against children. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage involving girls less than 15 years of age. The percentage of girls marrying before 18 years is 65% and 29% girls marry by the age of 15 years.¹⁰ This practice continues to be wide spread despite the existence of the Child Marriage Restraint Act since 1983. Numerous studies have found that child brides are more likely to suffer from serious health problems during delivery, live in poverty and remain illiterate.¹¹ Wide age gap between spouses results in unequal relationship and invites marital disharmony.

c. **Child neglect:** Child neglect includes failure to provide basic physical, emotional, medical and educational need a child.¹

d. **Sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking:** Child sexual abuse Incorporates sexual gratification by adults through kissing, fondling the sex organ of a child, talking about sexually implicit matters to a child, forcing or alluring a child in sexual acts of any kind. In Bangladesh society, this issue is a taboo hence there is little reliable quantitative data. Children of all ages are at risk of sexual abuse or harassment in their own homes, from relatives and family friend. Gaining qualitative data is also challenging because of the shame and culture of silence associated with abuse. Child trafficking in Bangladesh is extensive both within

the country and to abroad. In most cases, known persons are the procurers of these children with the help of unscrupulous exploiters such as pimps, brothel owners, traffickers and agents.¹² These agents lure young girls and children to leave home for better jobs and marriage. Many boys have been trafficked as "camel racing jockeys" which is a cruel and dangerous sport practiced in the Middle East countries. Many children who have experienced or are experiencing sexual abuse, exploitation or trafficking are susceptible to drug and substance abuse as a form of escape. These children are vulnerable to HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted infections.

Environmental of abuse

a. **Child labor:** Child labor is considered as one of the worst forms of child exploitation around the world.¹³ Children are forcefully engaged in risky work including pushing rickshaws, as helpers at railway stations, launch ghat & bus terminals, breaking bricks at construction sites, carrying groceries for consumers in shops, peeling and packing in industries and large scale factories. The minimum age for employment according to Child Labor Code is 14yrs depending on the nature of the work, but this is not implemented in Bangladesh. Violence in the work place includes using abusive languages, low payment, long working hours, no leisure time or holidays and beatings. These children become mentally unhealthy and suffer from emotional stress and developmental problems.

b. **Domestic violence:** Abuse, torture and trauma to young girls engaged in domestic jobs are increasing in numbers. Recently, it has been estimated that the total number of domestic child workers in the country vary from 2,00,000 to a million.¹⁴ About 25% of housewives report that they physically beat child domestics to punish them for poor performance or ill behaviour. In 68% cases, they verbally abuse children for poor performance.¹⁵

c. **Violence on the streets:** Children living on the streets are mostly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation according to report prepared by UNICEF in 2009. These children grow up without suitable accommodation, protection, education, health care, food, safe drinking water, security, supervision, recreation and guidance. Criminal networks engage these children in commercial sex work, smuggling, stealing and distribution of drugs and weapons.¹⁶

Effects of child abuse

The early experience of child abuse can trigger changes in child's behavior including discipline problems, insomnia, nightmares, anxiety, depression etc. This also causes problem with mental development of a child which interrupt his feelings, empathy, sympathy, reasoning, rational thinking and benevolence. Children who have been abused or neglected are more likely to be arrested as juvenile offenders & are more likely to be a sadist and involve in criminal activities as an adult.¹

Measures to be taken to reduce child abuse

There is a range of laws in Bangladesh designed to protect children, but they apply varyingly to children in different situations. There is no singular law that looks at children in every vulnerable situation they may find themselves in. Government should recognize the scale of the problem and create stronger laws to protect the rights of our children by creating public awareness about child education and risky child labor, strengthening family ties, early reporting of child abuse cases to the law enforcement authority, developing and sustaining prevention programs and facilitating effective school-based child sexual abuse prevention program throughout the country.

Conclusion

Child abuse is a silent epidemic. It is a social crime and is therefore a threat to our civilization. The intense media spotlight, often on particularly horrifying individual cases of violence against children suggests-greater prevalence. Children are probably the most neglected members of our society. As a result they are consistently becoming easy victims of all sorts of abuses. Violence against children must be stopped and the judiciary, law enforcing agents, parents and guardians of the children themselves must be sensitized to the provisions of the convention on the Rights of the child and the laws protecting children in Bangladesh. It is important for everyone to know the signs of child abuse and how to report it. We all share a responsibility to help keep our children safe. Children have the right to be children, to be loved, cherished, educated, nourished, clothed, pampered as children when they are children. Our vision should

be to establish a healthy, child-rights enriched society, free of abuse, exploitation and discrimination for the disadvantaged children of Bangladesh.

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