



Child Sexual Abuse: Prevalence and Impact on Mental Health

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FINAL APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROFICIENCY

It is to certify that we have read the research proficiency paper by Isra Arif Zia. It is our judgment that this paper is of sufficient standard to warrant its acceptance by Bahria University, Islamabad for the award of degree (BSS)

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore personal experiences of child sexual abuse in both male and female adolescents, while exploring the impact on the mental health of the victims.

The aims of this study are; to discover whether incidences of child sexual abuse are experienced equally by males and females, to ascertain the gender of the abuser and lastly learn about the impacts of abuse on the mental health of the victim. The method which has been used to carry out this research is analysis of archival data which was provided by the key informant, who is a part of an organization by the name of Sahil. After analyzing data the main themes which were identified include; abuser is most often a male, low socio-economic status as a risk factor, 50% of the victims reported the abuse to the police, out of fifteen cases; seven were male victims while eight were female and lastly the mental health outcomes show that six out of the fifteen victims indicated symptoms of depression. In order to lessen these issues, it is necessary to spread awareness amongst low income families and communities, furthermore it is recommended that there is a need for prevention through school based programs.

1.1 Introduction:

This study aims to explore the prevalence and reporting of sexual abuse in both male and female adolescents. For the purpose of this study the period of adolescence is defined as 10 years to 19 years as prescribed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2016). It is a common belief that the victims of sexual abuse are largely females. This study aims to explore this belief, and compare whether the prevalence of child sexual abuse is in fact greater in females, or if reporting rates are higher in females – which may account for the discrepancy. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Justice (2000) data from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) a male child is at the greatest risk of being abused/assaulted at the age of 4, while a female child's age of greatest risk is 14 years. Perhaps it is this difference in the age of vulnerability that accounts for lower reporting rates in male victims of child sexual abuse. The goal of this study is to add to the limited literature on the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Pakistan, through first hand interviews and reports.

1.2 Child Sexual Abuse

The World Health Organization defines sexual abuse as an act in which a child is taken advantage of against his/her will. Most often children who fall victim to sexual abuse are completely unaware of what is being done to them. The WHO has outlined three types of sexual abuse, these are;

1. The involvement of a child in any sexual activity without his/her permission.
2. The use of children for prostitution and other such unlawful activities.
3. The involvement of children in unlawful material such as child pornography. (World Health Organization, 1999).

The American Society for the Positive care of Children defines sexual abuse as the mistreatment and or exploitation of a child in a sexual manner. This exploitation could be done for financial gain or just for sexual pleasure for the perpetrator. The society outlines activities such as rape, pornography, molestation, prostitution and any other such sexual activity as sexual abuse. (American Society for Positive care of Children, 2014)

Sahil, an NGO in Pakistan working to raise awareness about and combat child sexual abuse defines child sexual abuse as a forced sexual activity comprising eight various types, namely voyeurism, comments of a sexual nature, exhibitionism, pornography, kissing or touching, touching or stroking body parts, oral sex and rape or sodomy (Sahil, 2014).

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, in its Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet (2009) defines child sexual abuse as:

Any interaction between a child and an adult (or another child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or an observer. Sexual abuse can include both touching and non-touching behaviors. Touching behaviors may involve touching of the vagina, penis, breasts or buttocks, oral-genital contact, or sexual intercourse. Non-touching behaviors can include voyeurism (trying to look at a child's naked body), exhibitionism, or exposing the child to pornography. Abusers often do not use physical force, but may use play, deception, threats, or other forms of coercion to engage children and maintain their silence. Abusers frequently employ persuasive and manipulative tactics to keep the child engaged. These tactics—referred to as “grooming”—may include buying gifts or arranging special activities, which can further confuse the victim.

These definitions all imply that any interaction of a sexual nature, whether involving direct contact or implicit communication can be classified as child sexual abuse. The definition provided by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network further implies that due to the coercive element involved in child sexual abuse, perpetrators are commonly known to the child – this allows them to manipulate, and coerce the child into submission.

1.3 Problem Statement

The literature on child sexual abuse is severely limited in reference to Pakistan; even more so for the population of male adolescents. This study aims to explore personal experiences of child sexual abuse in both male and female adolescents, whilst also exploring the impact on mental health for victims.

1.4 Objectives:

1. To document the experiences of child sexual abuse, and establish whether incidences of child sexual abuse are equally experienced by males and females.
2. Ascertain the gender of the perpetrator.
3. Explore how child sexual abuse impacts the victim's mental health.

1.5 Research Questions:

1. Whether the incidence of child sexual abuse is equally experienced by both males and females.
2. What is the gender of the perpetrator?
3. How does child sexual abuse impact the victim's mental health?

1.6 Review of Literature

Sahil's Cruel Numbers Report (2015) indicates that based on data collected from media sources, and from cases reported directly to Sahil, on average 10 children are abused in Pakistan every day. The total number of registered cases for 2015 is 3768, which demonstrated a 7% increase from the preceding year. Within these registered cases, 1723 are of gang rape and/or gang sodomy, and 290 are of attempted rape/sodomy, gang sodomy or gang rape. This data indicates that just under 50% of the reported cases are for extreme cases of sexual abuse. Furthermore, 112 cases of child marriage were also recorded. The report also defines that of the registered cases 1974 females were victims and 1794 males. The age group for both boys and girls at greatest risk was indicated as 11 to 15 years. This data is only reflective of cases that are registered, and it indicates that the distribution of cases between both genders is relatively equal, with females comprising 52% and males comprising 48% of the reported cases. However, it is assumed that there are a great number of child abuse cases that go unreported – either due to lack of disclosure by the victim, or due to fear of social consequences by the victims' family.

A study on male experiences of disclosure (Sorsoli, Kia-Keating & Grossman, 2008) conducted qualitative interviews with 16 male survivors of child sexual abuse. The study indicates that the men more often described barriers to disclosure, and very few real experiences with sharing their abuse. Of the entire sample, only one male had intentionally shared the details of his abuse. The findings of the study further indicate that one of the major barriers to disclosing their abuse was sociocultural; in that they believed that it was unacceptable for males to have been abused, and in the event that they had been abused the expectation as for them not to disclose their experiences. A candidate of the study shared that he had observed most literature on sexual abuse focusing on female survivors and felt that the books/literature was not relevant to him. An important finding of this study was that the participants reported that in certain ways

their experience of disclosing their abuse fostered personal growth and allowed them to develop growing trust in others.

With regard to male experiences of child sexual abuse, and reporting of such experiences, it has been theorized that due to the difference in socialization of boys, incidences of disclosure of abuse for boys may be lower. Since qualities of strength, self-containment, and stoicism are valued in males, the fear of disclosing feelings and/or vulnerabilities may be a large motivator in avoidance of disclosure (Goldman & Padayachi, 2000). Ted Shaw (2010) explores male experiences of child sexual abuse and highlights how the common held standard belief is that males are the perpetrators of abuse; perpetrators are usually strangers who are ruthless and the victims are female. He challenges this standard; and points out its flaws, reminding us that male children experience child sexual abuse too – and the negative effect of this abuse on both boys and girls begins immediately after the abuse takes place and continues long into adulthood. Another important aspect highlighted by Shaw (2010) is that since perpetrators of abuse are most often male, when male children are abused, it may also dredge up some levels of confusion regarding sexual identity and severe embarrassment for male on male interactions.

Male survivors of abuse also report feeling inferior and alienated from peers; and these feelings cause a hindrance to developing meaningful relationships thereby exacerbating their isolation and the negative impact of the abuse. Furthermore they reported self-blame, shame, feelings of insecurity regarding their masculinity, confusion regarding sexual orientation and sense of responsibility (Lisak, 1994).

In a study exploring various kinds of child abuse in Europe, it was determined that between 6 and 36% of girls under the age of 16 experience sexual abuse; while for males the incidence is between 1 and 15% (Lampe, 2002).

Webster and Hall (2004) focus on the role educators have in dealing with disclosure of child sexual abuse; and highlight how educators should respond to incidences of disclosure by students under their care. They insist that while verbal reassurance, and providing the child with a sense of safety is vital – non-verbal cues are also crucial. Non-verbal forms of communication, including silence can send potent messages to children, and may impact the ability of a child to trust in the future. Another vital aspect when dealing with disclosure is to reassure the child that the abuse was not their fault. Being prepared for how to deal with disclosure of abuse as an educator is very important – as the responses provided impact a child’s emotional well-being and future relational abilities (Webster & Hall, 2004). Based on this, it may be inferred that the same preparedness is vital for a parent or caregiver as well. Far too often experiences of disclosure are met with disbelief, humor or denial (Sorsoli, Kia-Keating & Grossman, 2008).

When Finkelhor (2009) discusses the prevention of child sexual abuse and the promotion of disclosure he highlights that programs at school that focus on the education and awareness of child sexual abuse equip children and adolescents with the skills to recognize risky situations, decline the approach of an abuser, cut off an interaction that seems uncomfortable and get help when required. These programs also encourage disclosure and reduce feelings of responsibility in the child. In the absence, or very limited presence of such programs in schools in Pakistan – it is wondered how aware children are regarding what constitutes child sexual abuse; their right to protect themselves; and the importance of disclosure.

While considering reporting of child sexual abuse, it is important to mention that even in the developed United Kingdom, it has been noted that there is under reporting of incidences of child sexual abuse within the Asian community – factors such as honour (*izzat*), modesty (*haya*), and shame (*sharam*) have been found to impact women’s accessing of social services and

reporting of child sexual abuse (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006). Based on this it may be assumed, that within the narrow minded Pakistani society, with largely patriarchal values, limited social services and high value placed on honour there are significant cultural barriers to disclosure and reporting of child sexual abuse.

Methodology:

2.1 Research Design:

The research design this study is going to follow will be qualitative research; this type of research has to do with definitions, characteristics, description and the concept of things. (Berg, 2007). Furthermore qualitative research seeks to explore phenomena. It focuses on how people behave in natural settings and is based on the experiences of people, which cannot be described numerically. This type of research is explorative and helps to develop new concepts. (Hancock, Ockleford and Windridge, 2009). Exploratory research will help the researcher to gain insight and familiarity into a certain issue, the researcher is then able understand the root of the problem and will therefore be in a position to make recommendations and work on minimizing the problem. (Berg, 2007).

2.2 Sampling Design:

For the purpose of this study organizations that work with sexual abuse survivors have been approached in order to gain access to a sample with experiences of abuse and its effects. The organization most suitable for such data based on their work and goals, is; Sahil.

The type of sampling most appropriate for this study is non-probability sampling. This type of sampling does not involve the random selection of subjects. The specific type of non-probability sampling the study will follow purposive sampling; it is considered to be a subjective sampling as it allows the researcher to select subjects in accordance with the topic. (Trochim, W. 2006).

While direct access to respondents was not possible due to the delicate nature of this topic, the key informant identified cases most relevant to the objectives/research questions.

2.3 Data Collection Tools:

1. Key Informant:

For the purpose of this study a key informant has been selected from Sahil which is an organization that works sexual abuse, the key informant assisted with gathering data by providing access to case files.

A key informant helps to provide an expert opinion on a particular issue, and is also aware of what is happening in the community with regard to that particular issue. A key informant must be selected for their specific understanding and unique view of a particular topic. (USAID,1996).

2. Research Questions:

A set of questions were given to the key informant, who then assisted in providing case files that best addressed the questions outlined for this research study.

The Research questions used are as follows:

1. What is the background of the child? Factors such as age, socio-economic level and education.
2. Where did the abuse take place? How old was the child when it happened?
3. Was the abuser male or female?
4. What was the duration of the abuse?
5. How did the abuse affect the mental health of the victim?

3. Results and Themes:

Of the fifteen case studies analyzed five had insufficient data, however they are still included in analysis as they have factors which are relevant to major themes that were discovered through the course of research.

Data analysis of the data collected from various case studies demonstrated a number of common themes. These themes are discussed in the following text.

Themes:

3.1 Abuse and Patriarchy

Through the process of analyzing the data collected during the course of this research study, it was found that the perpetrator of child sexual abuse in all 15 cases was male. Various theories may explain the high incidence of male abusers. However what seems to stand out most to me is that sexual abuse may be seen as a way of asserting power and control over the victim. This was especially highlighted in a few cases. One such case was pertaining to a 13 year old female, who had been abused by her step father three to four times. In addition to this the step father was physically abusive to the girl's mother, so not only was he trying to assert his power over his wife, but also his step daughter. The abuse left the victim feeling "fearful" and afraid even though home is where a child should feel most secure. In another case, a 15 year old female, was abused by a boy from her school. The boy approached her and wanted to be friends with her but she refused his offer. As a result, he waited till she was on her way home from school and alone, he rode up to her on his bike and took her away to a secluded location where he sexually abused her. This incident greatly affected the victim as she dropped out of school, thus showing that the male was successful in "punishing" her for not giving in to him, when he asked to be friends. Another case study that showed the abuser trying to gain power and control is of a 13 year old

male. The boy was on his way home from the market, when he was stopped by two boys, who he knew from the neighborhood. These boys took the victim to a secluded location, and sexually abused him and also filmed and photographed the victim during the abuse. This incident of abuse demonstrates the boys exercising power and control over the victim, as by filming and photographing the abuse, they were in the position to embarrass as well as threaten and or control the victim.

3.2 Risk Factors

During reading and analyzing all the case studies, I was able to establish that the victims of child sexual abuse in all fifteen cases studies were from families of a low socio-economic class. This means that they don't have access to information regarding not only prevention of abuse but also general protection of the child and his/her rights. In one of the case studies, a 13 year old female was sexually abused by two boys. The abuse occurred at the victim's older sister's friend's house. The friend asked if the victim could come over and help her do some work, and the older sister agreed. However when the victim arrived at the friend's house, two boys came into the room and sexually abused her, while the friend just stood outside. When the family of the victim came over and found out what was happening the friend denied having any knowledge about it and claimed that she had nothing to do with the abuse. Such a situation could be avoided if there was more access to information amongst the lower socio-economic classes of society. If the victim's parents were educated and knew more about the importance of child protection, such an incident could be prevented. Not only are the parents unaware of the rights of a child and the importance of child protection, but so are the children themselves. Out of the fifteen case studies, thirteen of them attend school, but since they are at government schools which have a substandard level of education, the children don't learn anything about the immense importance

of self-worth as well as self-protection. In another case, a 14 year old female, was abused by two boys from her village, who were from a rich powerful family. She had gone to the fields to cut grass when they came and took her to their 'kothi' and sexually abused her. This shows that not only were the males asserting power over her but in addition to that they were also exploiting her, as she was from a much lower socio-economic level than them and so they felt that they could take advantage of her and there would be no repercussions. These boys and many others like them are able to get away with such incidents due to lack of awareness of and access to information.

3.3 Legal Protection

Out of the fifteen case studies I am studying and analyzing, seven of them were reported to the police and fought in the courts. This is considered to be a positive outcome and it is definitely a step towards the right direction. Especially since all the victims of my research come from low socio-economic backgrounds, and yet look for justice. It is heartening to see that they evidently have a certain level of belief in the system. Out of these seven reported cases, four of the victims were males while three were females. This tells that more males report cases of abuse. As they are considered to be the more 'powerful' part of society, at least in comparison to females. On the other hand, women are not only considered to be weaker in Pakistani society but are also treated as a possession. Females are used to measure the respect of a family, so to openly admit that a female of the family was sexually abused is a considered an embarrassment. This could be one of the reasons why reporting of sexual abuse isn't a hundred percent. In the cases where the female's families have reported the abuse it has been severe cases, like for example, a fifteen year old female who was sexually abused by a cousin from her father's side of the family. The victim's father's was so enraged that he wanted to get justice. However in another case, there

was a twelve year old female was abused in her home, in her bed, in the middle of the night. The abuser was someone from the neighborhood who broke into their home, sexually abused her and escaped as soon as he heard the parents coming. This case went un-reported, as the victim's parents did not want to deal with the societal ramifications of such a case, thus proving that in many cases the parents believe it is easier to just push it away and forget, however by doing so the child may fall victim to long lasting psychological issues. Not only does reporting need to increase but it is also important for organizations working with victims of sexual abuse to see what outcomes can/have been achieved through police reporting.

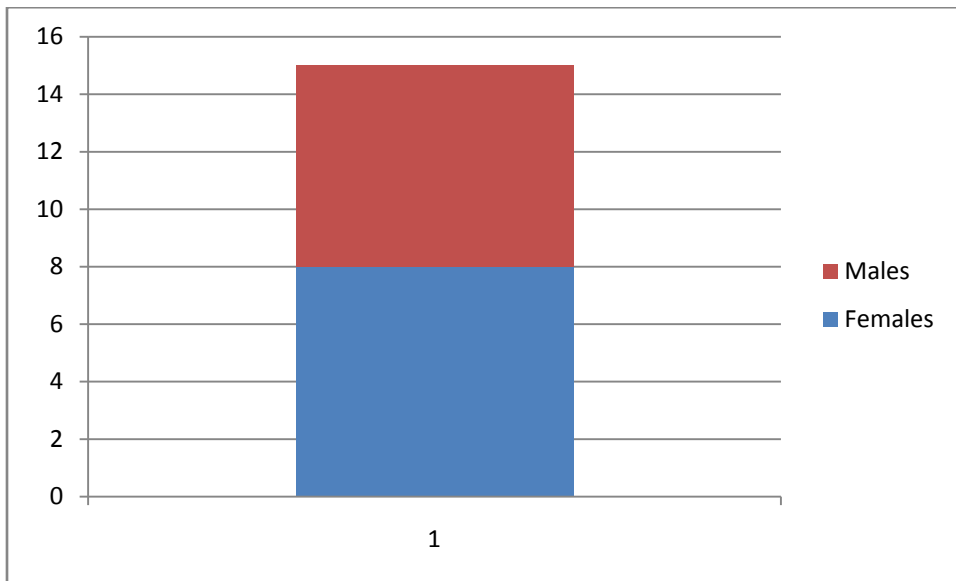
3.4 Gender

One of the objectives of this research was to establish whether prevalence of child sexual abuse was higher in females rather than in males. Out of my sample of fifteen case studies, seven of these had male victims, while the remaining eight case studies had female victims. Thus showing that sexual abuse in children is higher in females as compared to males. At least according to the data from the case studies I am analyzing. However this could be due to varying levels of disclosure between males and females. The gender roles in Pakistani society, place strength, power and stability in the male, while placing dependency, timidity and maybe even a kind of weakness in the females.

3.5 Psychological Impact

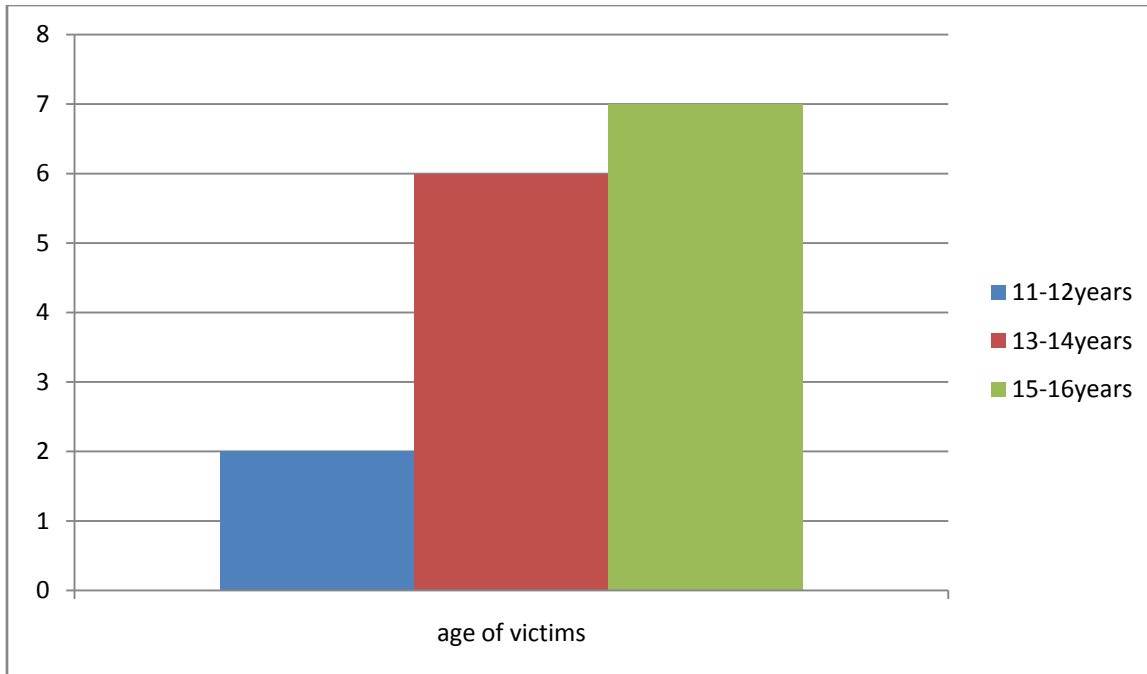
Out of the fifteen victims, six of them indicated symptoms of depression such as loss of appetite, loss of interest in activities, sad and depressed mood and sleep disturbance. Hence this indicates that victims of abuse are at a higher risk of developing/experiencing depression. This theme is of special significance as it indicates that experiences of abuse can cause disturbances in mental health which if unresolved can have a long term impact.

Table of Results

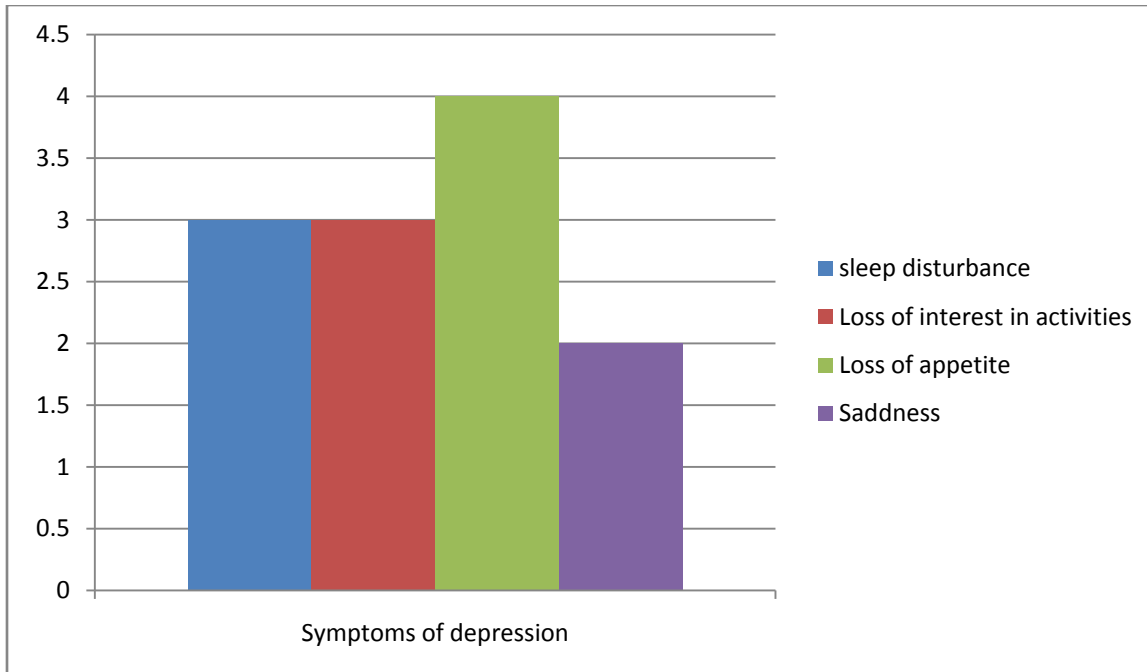


The graph above disproves the widely held belief that only females are victims of sexual abuse.

This graph shows that out of the fifteen case studies being analyzed, eight were females while seven were males.



The graph above shows that out of the fifteen case studies majority of the victims were abused between the ages of 13-16 years, and this is around about the time that they hit puberty.



This graph shows the various symptoms of depression and how many victims underwent those symptoms. After analyzing the data it can be established that all of the fifteen victims reported disturbances in both emotional and mental health.

4. Discussion:

Child sexual abuse, particularly in Pakistan, is an issue that is kept quiet. It does not receive the focus and attention that is required to address it as a problem that plagues the community and that adversely impacts not only the victims of abuse but also entire family units. Child sexual abuse threatens the safety and security of children and as demonstrated by empirical evidence it is associated with a range of negative outcomes for the victims, which include, poor mental health, psychopathology, low self-esteem, substance abuse, depression and so forth (Molnar, Buka & Kessler, 2001).

The present study aimed to determine whether experiences of child sexual abuse are limited to female children; assess the gender of the perpetrators of abuse; explore socioeconomic status of the victims of abuse and explore mental health outcomes for the victims. This study found that low socioeconomic status poses as a risk factor for child sexual abuse, due to the fact that all of the cases explored through the course of this study dealt with children belonging to a low socioeconomic status. This finding is backed by research that found that child sexual abuse usually takes place within a larger framework of childhood adversity (Molnar, Buka & Kessler, 2001). The implication of this finding is far reaching – given that the vast majority of the Pakistani population lives below the poverty line; it may be assumed that a similarly large majority of children is at a high risk for child sexual abuse. Finkelhor (1999) states that two conditions within the family system put children at greater risk; the first being compromised quality and quantity of care provided by adults in the family, and the second being emotional deprivation within the family. For families of lower socioeconomic levels, parents may often times be unavailable due to work, and may be unable to provide consistent high quality care to their children. The responsibility hence lies with the community to provide safe, protected

alternates for children with absent parents, in the form of child care, child community centers and so forth.

Advocates for Youth (2008) highlights the importance of school prevention programs, such programs are disseminated at schools and focus on teaching children empowerment, personal safety and avoidance of situations and individuals that may threaten them. All of the victims included in this research study were part of government schools, where access to any kind of information or preventive programs is impossible. However, it is hoped that with through the research into child sexual abuse and the dissemination of findings the importance of preventive programs at school may receive greater attention. Sahil and Rozan are currently two organizations working on programs pertaining to child sexual abuse. Rozan has been a pioneer in developing programs geared towards awareness and prevention of child sexual abuse – however these efforts are in drastic need of being scaled up and taken to a wider level using government schools and institutions as a platform.

With regards to the impact of child sexual abuse on mental health of the victims, there is an abundance of literature that highlights the adverse impact of abuse on the mental health of a child (Spataro, Mullen, Burgess, Wells & Moss, 2004; Molnar, Buka & Kessler, 2001; Banyard, Williams & Siegel, 2001). These outcomes follow them into adulthood. Within the scope of the present study, all the victims reported disturbances in their emotional and mental health, while six victims reported symptoms of depression. This brings attention to yet another taboo within the Pakistani culture, the taboo of mental health; mental health concerns or disturbances are associated with shame, and significantly negative connotations. Hence, when children who have experienced abuse report disturbances in their emotional and mental health these concerns often go unaddressed, which may then cause them to intensify and have more serious implications on

mental well-being. The US Department of Justice (2001) specifies that an adequate response to an incidence of child sexual abuse involves various systems within the community. Medical professionals should assess and treat any possible injuries, therapists should provide emotional support and counseling services, social service agencies should work with the family to provide support, law enforcement agencies should file the case and pursue legal proceedings. In view of this coordinated response outlined; it is clear that within our community there are glaring discrepancies in the response. The results of this study may be used to inform relevant professionals of the crucial need for sensitized and coordinated care at the critical time at which abuse is reported. Families and children that endure child sexual abuse have experienced trauma and are often times still in crisis – in light of that the responses need to be carefully coordinated and sensitized.

The results of this study found that an almost equal number of the victims were male and female. Within other cultural systems, findings have been that female children experience sexual abuse more frequently and rates are higher within female populations, between 12 to 40% of females and between 4 and 16.5% of males have had at least one experience of sexual abuse (National Center for Victims of Crime, 2012; Advocates for Youth 2008). However, data in Pakistan is conflicting, Sahil's cruel numbers report (2015) indicates that 52% of the victims of abuse for the year 2015 were female while 48% were male. The results of this study align with the statistics within this report. More extensive research needs to be conducted to ascertain the accuracy of these reports; however the most important aspect of these findings are that abusers may not discriminate based on gender, and children of both genders are at risk of sexual abuse. This finding is crucial in informing future policy and prevention efforts. Efforts need not be geared specifically towards female populations, through schools for girls and community

programs for women, rather these programs must be conducted universally for all children regardless of gender.

5. Recommendations

During the course of my research and while thoroughly analyzing the data, I have been able to put together some recommendations which will help to lessen the negative effects of child sexual abuse.

- Firstly, there is a dire need for more research in this area in Pakistan. There needs to be more research into the child's/family's experience with disclosure and coping, after abuse has occurred.
- In addition to this, efforts at prevention through school based programs need to be introduced. Such programs barely exist and those that do are poorly managed, therefore they need to be monitored, improved and scaled up.
- It is suggested that prevention efforts be focused on low income families and communities, who have minimal access to information and are unaware of rights such as child program. Therefore workshops and information sessions should be carried out to make these low income communities aware of prevention strategies. It is also essential to provide safe community spaces for low income families.
- Finally, it is important to spread awareness about the implication of child sexual abuse on mental health.

4. Interview Guide:

- What is the background of the child, who has been abused? What socio-economic background does he/she come from?
- Is the child school going?
- How old was the child at the time of the abuse?
- What was the gender of the abuser?
- What the abuser known to the child or was he/she a stranger?
- Where did the abuse occur?
- Duration of the abuse; was it a single time abuse or multiple?
- What made the victim report the abuse and why?
- What was the physical condition of the victim after abuse?
- What effects did the abuse have to the mental health of the victim?
- How did the victim cope; was he/she able to return back to his/her life? Such as school etc.

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