



Violence against the adolescents of Kolkata: A study in relation to the socio-economic background and mental health



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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to understand the nature of violence suffered by the adolescents of Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta) and to identify its relation with their socio-economic background and mental health variables such as anxiety, adjustment, and self-concept. It is a cross-sectional study covering a total of 370 adolescents (182 boys and 188 girls) from six higher secondary schools in Kolkata. The data was gathered by way of a semi-structured questionnaire and three standard psychological tests. Findings revealed that 52.4%, 25.1%, and 12.7% adolescents suffered psychological, physical, and sexual violence in the last year. Older adolescents (aged 17–18 years) suffered more psychological violence than the younger ones (15–16 years) ($p < 0.05$). Sixty nine (18.6%) adolescent students stood witness to violence between adult members in the family. More than three-fifth (61.9%) adolescents experienced at least one type of violence, while one-third (32.7%) experienced physical or sexual violence or both. Whatever its nature is, violence leaves a scar on the mental health of the victims. Those who have been through regular psychological violence reported high anxiety, emotional adjustment problem, and low self-concept. Sexual abuse left a damaging effect on self-concept ($p < 0.05$), while psychological violence or the witnessing of violence prompted high anxiety scores ($p < 0.05$), poor emotional adjustment ($p < 0.05$), and low self-concept ($p < 0.05$). This study stresses the need to provide individual counselling services to the maltreated adolescents of Kolkata so that their psychological traumas can heal and that they can move on in life with new hopes and dreams.

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1. Introduction

Violence against children and adolescents is a global public health problem which deserves the special attention of local governments for the protection of child rights (Deb and Madrid, 2014). The causes of violence against children and adolescents differ from culture to culture. In India, the causes are traced to entrenched cultural beliefs and practices of parenting, stress in daily life, poverty, illiteracy, alcoholism, living environment, family problem, mental health problems of the adults at home, ineffective implementation of law, and the lack of child friendly policies (Alyahri and Goodman, 2008; Holt et al., 2008; Hyder and Malik,

2007; Renner and Slack, 2006; Deb, 2005; Mitra and Deb, 2004; Deb and Modak, 2010; Saha et al., 2014a,b; Deb and Madrid, 2014). The onus of responsibility for the protection and development of children and adolescents falls on their family or, more precisely, on their parents. Paradoxically enough, it is family which mostly turns out to be the cause of their sufferings. Family ought to provide a safe and peaceful place for all its members, particularly for its children (Deb, 2006). This fact is recognised by the United Nation Convention on the Rights of The Child (CRC) when it says that family is the most conducive setting for the development and well-being of children and adolescents (UN Secretary General Study, 2005).

As noted earlier, child abuse in Indian society receives great impetus from cultural beliefs and practices. According to a study carried out in Kolkata, about one-third (30%) male and near to one-fifth (16.7%) of female teachers still maintain the view that physical punishments are necessary for disciplining children in schools

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(Deb, 2004). There exist other forms of abuse and neglect and they include child trafficking, girl child marriage, abandonment of new born children and child labour. Series of regional studies were carried out on different types of abuse and violence against children and adolescents in India. Although their numbers are few, their findings provide some idea into the nature of the problem. The study carried out by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, on child abuse is one such example in which 13 states were covered. This study claimed that children of both sexes whose ages ranged from 5 to 12 years experienced the worst kind of abuse. Strange as it might seem, the abusers were mostly persons in position of trust and authority (MWCD, 2007). According to the findings of a study carried out during 2009–2010 covering seven states in India, 99.7% of children and adolescents reported one or more types of punishment (Report of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, 2012). In a Kolkata-based study, 52.4, 25.1, and 12.7% adolescents reported to have suffered psychological, physical, and sexual abuse (Bhattacharyya, 2012). Another study carried out in Tripura, India, revealed that about 20.9, 21.9, and 18.1% of children underwent psychological, physical, and sexual violence, respectively (Deb and Modak, 2010). Again, a Kolkata-based study claimed that 33.3% of male and 40.0% of female teachers admitted to punishing students physically and that they were rarely reprimanded by the school authorities. The schools have the tendency to connive in such incidents or to make light of them.

One of the latest studies carried out in Puducherry during 2013–2014 and funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, confirmed the escalation of child abuse. In the preceding year of the survey, violence of various forms was high in Puducherry. About 73.4% ($n = 381$) were verbally treated in a mean and aggressive way (verbal violence); 321 (61.9%) were spanked or beaten up (physical violence); 200 (38.5%) were sexually assaulted (sexual violence). Sexual violence is vividly illustrated by two recent cases in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The first case is the brutal gang rape and murder of two teenaged cousins, aged 15 and 14, at night in a village in the Baduan district. The depravity of the assailants was such that they later hung the corpses in a tree (May 27, 2014). The second case is the abduction, rape, and murder of a 15-year old girl by a pack of debauchees in a village in the Sitapur district at an interval of a week. Her body, too, was hung in a tree (NDTV, June 30, 2014). The rape case in Tamil Nadu, if not as horrific as the two previous cases, is still extremely disturbing. Two minors, aged 10 and 11, were raped at knifepoint in a children's home run by a church in the Coimbatore district (Sairam, 2014). The instances can be multiplied. 226 (43.6%) witnessed adults known (father, mother, or any relative) or unknown to them behave in a way that frightened or upset them (witnessing violence)

1.1. Effect of violence on mental health

A population-based study of parents covering four countries including India brought to light a startling fact that mothers in India were found to be responsible for highest rates of corporal punishment against their children. Corporal/physical punishment involved beating up children with objects (36%), kicking (10%), and choking (2%) at least once in six months preceding data collection (Sadowski et al., 2004). The after effects of corporal punishment on adjustment have been found in several studies. Earlier studies demonstrated that the children who experience corporal punishment manifest severe adjustment difficulties, more aggressiveness, lower social competence and cognitive abilities, and poor academic performance in schools than their non-abused peers (see Deb and Walsh, 2012; Deb and Mukherjee, 2011; Deb and Mathews, 2012; Kolko, 2002; Macdonald, 2001). At

the same time, adverse effects of psychological abuse have been documented by several studies. They include low self-esteem, interpersonal relationship problems, anxiety, depression (Briere and Runtz, 1988; Berzenski and Yates, 2010; Mullen et al., 1996; Ney et al., 1994). In addition, in later life these children and adolescents suffer from borderline personality traits and eating disorders (Allen, 2008; Hund and Espelage, 2006; Mazzeo and Espelage, 2002).

Patel and Andrew (2001) did a study in Goa, India among high school students and reported that one-third of the children were victims of sexual abuse. The academic performance, mental and physical health as well as parental relationships of victim children were found to be poor. At the same time, these children were dependent on substance, and were involved in consensual sexual behaviour than their non-abused peers. In another study carried out in Kolkata, Deb and Mukherjee (2009) observed that 69.2% of sexually abused girls suffered from moderate to severe depression, as compared to 27.5% of sexually non-abused girls. The same research also highlighted that 20.8% and 60.1% of victim girls displayed poor social and emotional adjustment, respectively, as compared to 4.17% and 32.5% of sexually non-abused girls.

Currently, far less study are carried out in developing countries such as India than in Western countries for understanding the types of violence done against children and adolescents and its correlation with anxiety, adjustment, and self-concept. The nature of violence varies from society to society, and therefore the relationship of violence with mental health variables varies accordingly. It is the variation of the nature of violence which motivated the undertaking of the present study. There were three objectives of the study and they include (i) to study the nature of violence against adolescents; (ii) to study the association of psychological, physical, and sexual violence or the sighting of violence with demographic variables; (iii) to study the effect of different types of violence on mental health variables (such as anxiety, adjustment, self-concept, and self-confidence).

2. Methods

2.1. Site

The cross-sectional study was carried out in six higher secondary schools in Kolkata (West Bengal). Located on the western banks of Hooghly River, it lies in the Eastern part of India. Often referred to as “the City of Joy,” Kolkata is one of the four metropolitan cities of India. As of the 2011 Census of India, the City of Kolkata has about 4.5 million residents. Kolkata is India's third largest metropolitan area and the eighth largest metropolitan area in the world (United Nations, 2005). A good number population from the neighbouring states swarms into Kolkata in pursuit of education, vocation, and employment. Both private and public run schools are available in Kolkata and the medium of instructions for teaching in private schools is English while in Public schools it is mostly regional language i.e., Bengali.

2.2. Participants

The present study covered Grade 11 and 12 male and female adolescents. Six schools (three schools teaching male students only and three teaching female students) were selected purposely keeping geographic spread in mind. From each of the five schools, 60 students (30 from Grade 11 and 30 from Grade 12) were covered; and from one school were covered 70 students. There were 370 students in total (182 males and 188 females) and they all participated in the project voluntarily.

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