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## Physical, sexual and emotional abuse during childhood: Experiences of a sample of Sri Lankan Young adults



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## ABSTRACT

Abuse during childhood is a human tragedy leading to lifelong adverse health, social, and economic consequences for survivors. This descriptive, cross-sectional study aimed to determine the prevalence of childhood physical, sexual and emotional abusive experiences among students (aged 18–19 years) in a Sri Lankan district.

Multistage cluster sampling was used to select a sample of 1500 students. Experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and age at abuse, perpetrators, consequences and severity were assessed using a version of ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool-Retrospective Version (ICAST-R) which was culturally adapted and validated by the authors for use amongst Sinhalese students.

The prevalence of the various forms of abuse during childhood was as follows: physical: 45.4% (95% CI: 42.9–7.9); sexual: 9.1% (95% CI: 7.6–10.5); emotional: 27.9% (95% CI: 25.7–30.2). The corresponding percentages of individuals categorized as having experienced severe or very severe abuse were as follows, physical: 0.3% (2/672); sexual: 4.05% (3/135); emotional: 8.8% (36/412). Experience of physical abuse was more prevalent amongst male students (54.8% vs. 38.3%) as was emotional abuse (33.9% vs. 23.2%), whereas experience of sexual abuse was more prevalent amongst female students (11.5% vs. 6.4%). Parents and teachers were the commonest perpetrators of physical and emotional abuse. Most of the sexually abusive acts were committed by neighbors or strangers. Some physically abusive acts were more frequent at earlier ages than emotional and sexual abusive acts, which were more common in late adolescence.

The results indicate the necessity of targeted interventions to address this public health issue.

### 1. Introduction

Abuse of a child is a human tragedy. Child abuse, also referred to as child maltreatment has a long recorded history spanning many parts of the world. One of the oldest recorded tales of child abuse is probably a 2500-year-old Buddhist story about a boy called Sopaka, from India. A jealous stepfather ties Sopaka to a corpse in a cemetery to be eaten by wolves. Buddha releases the boy and preaches to him, in what is probably one of the earliest recorded instances of counseling (Arandara, 2006). Lynch (1985) noted that in

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the West the most common methods of infanticides used to be throwing infants into water or gross neglect including deprivation of milk or food and exposure to hazardous weather (Lynch, 1985).

A United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2012) report on the epidemiology of physical report noted that more than one in four children worldwide have experienced severe and frequent physical abuse. Nearly one in five girls and one in eleven boys experience sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2012). A meta-analysis of global data indicated that worldwide nearly a quarter of adults (22.6%) have suffered physical abuse as a child, 36.3% have experienced emotional abuse and 16.3% physical neglect, with rates being similar for men and women. However, there is a sex difference in lifetime prevalence of childhood sexual abuse (girls: 18%; boys: 7.6%) (World Health Organization, 2014). UNICEF (2014) reported that violence against children was widespread across the East Asia and Pacific region, with 17–35% prevalence in both boys and girls in low- and lower middle-income countries and lower prevalence (1–13%) in upper middle- and high-income countries. UNICEF reported fairly consistent findings across the region and highlighted that nearly three out of every four children experience violent discipline. The prevalence of child sexual abuse ranges from 11–22% for girls and 316.5% for boys across countries in the East Asia and Pacific region. Childhood sexual abuse has been shown to be more prevalent in girls than boys, except in low-income countries where the prevalence is slightly higher in boys (16.5% vs. 13%). The prevalence estimates for emotional abuse range from 1841.6%, with wide variation across the region, but little variation by sex or across lower middle to upper middle-income countries (UNICEF, 2014).

Large scale studies reviewing the burden of child abuse in the South Asian region are scarce and most of the recent evidence on the prevalence of abuse comes from research conducted in a neighboring country, India. A study conducted in 13 states of India ( $N = 1300$ ) revealed that 69% of children aged 518 years reported having been physically abused and 44% reported having been humiliated, at least once in their life time (Ministry of Women & Child Development, 2007). A study of 1060 adolescent girls in the 7th to 12th grades in a semi-urban area in Delhi revealed lifetime prevalences of 43% for physical abuse, 27% for sexual abuse and 40% for neglect (Daral, Khokhar, & Pradhan, 2016).

There have been several large-scale studies of child abuse in Sri Lanka, almost all indicating that abuse during childhood is a public health problem in the country (de Zoysa, Newcombe, & Rajapakse, 2006; Family Health Bureau, 2015; Fernando & Karunasekara, 2009; Perera, Osbyte, Ariyananda, & Lelwala, 2009; Sriskandarajah, Neuner, & Catani, 2015). The most recent epidemiological data for Sri Lanka comes from the work of Sriskandarajah et al. (2015), who explored violence against children and its predictors in Northern Sri Lanka. In their sample of children 83.8% reported that a lifetime history of victimization in the home. On average the children reported 3.5 ( $SD = 3.2$ ) different types of victimization in the home and 71.6% stated that violence at home was 'continuous' (Sriskandarajah et al., 2015). The National Youth Survey conducted by the Family Health Bureau, Ministry of Health explored experiences of childhood sexual abuse in a nationally representative sample of 8118 young people in Sri Lanka aged 15–24 years in the year 2013–14. It revealed that 2.9% (95% CI: 2.53.5) had been sexually abused (Family Health Bureau, 2015). A cross-sectional study of 1226 school children aged 12 years in Colombo in 2008 found that experience of corporal punishment was prevalent (52.6%) and directly predicted the extent of psychological maladjustment. Non-parent-to-child violence (i.e., domestic, school, peer and community violence) was found to be associated with psychological difficulties (de Zoysa et al., 2006).

The three-month prevalence figures for physical abuse among 2389 late adolescents attending school in the Southern province of Sri Lanka were 22.4% and 15.7% amongst male and female adolescents respectively, whilst the corresponding figures for emotional abuse were 31.3% and 25.4% (Perera et al., 2009). A study of lifetime prevalence of physical and sexual abuse in 1322 undergraduates attending a state university assessed lifetime history of physical and sexual abuse using the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) and reported prevalence figures of 44% for sexual and 36% for physical maltreatment (Fernando & Karunasekara, 2009).

Sexual abuse is the least studied form of abuse in Sri Lanka. In a study of 899 students starting university in Sri Lanka 18% of male students and 9.4% of female students reported that they had experienced childhood sexual abuse (De Silva, 2007).

Analysis of the available research evidence on child abuse in Sri Lanka shows that there is considerable variation in acts of abuse. Most of this research has considered only one or two types of child abuse and there is considerable variation in the operational definitions used and the recall periods studied. The Centre for Disease Control (CDC) has recognized that statistics on child abuse vary according to the definitions employed and it has reiterated the need for uniform yet culturally appropriate definitions and tools so that countries can make robust estimates of child maltreatment (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Aries, 2008).

Existing evidence on child abuse in Sri Lanka categorizes children by age and relates to victimization during a period of three months to one year prior to inquiry. It has been shown that children often deny recent incidents of abuse when asked, especially in Asian countries (de Zoysa et al., 2006), so these estimates of prevalence probably underestimate the problem. The scientific literature offers evidence-based, validated techniques for studying lifetime history of abuse in young adults, but they have not previously been used by Sri Lankan researchers. The failure to use standardized, internationally accepted and culturally validated definitions and tools (World Health Organization & ISPCAN, 2006) precludes comparison of findings from Sri Lanka with those from elsewhere in the South Asian region and the rest of the world.

The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence and severity of physical, sexual and emotional childhood abuse in a sample of young adults (aged 18–19 years) attending college in a district of Sri Lanka. The novel of the study is that it explored childhood abuse and distinguished three types of abuse, so it provides detailed evidence than can be used to inform policy development. A preliminary step in the research was the validation of a Sinhala version of the ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool-Retrospective version (ICAST-R), which is an internationally accepted tool, (World Health Organization & ISPCAN, 2006). The validated Sinhala version of the ICAST-R (SICAST-R; Chandraratne, Fernando, & Gunawardena, 2018 under review) was used in this study to determine the prevalence of childhood abuse.

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