



CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse data from an Arabian Gulf country revisited

Jude U. Ohaeri¹ and Ghenaim A. Al-Fayez²

¹Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Enugu, Enugu State, Nigeria, email judeohaeri@hotmail.com (formerly Department of Psychiatry, Psychological Medicine Hospital, Kuwait)

²Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Health Sciences Centre, Kuwait University, Kuwait

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We revisit our previous work on child abuse in Kuwait, with a focus on the sexual abuse data, and discuss the findings in the context of the local culture. In 2006, a nationwide sample of 4467 senior high-school students (mean age 16.9; 48.6% boys) at government secondary schools was studied. Over their lifetime, 8.6% had been sexually attacked, 5.9% had experienced someone threatening to have sex with them, 15.3% had experienced unwanted sexual exposure, and 17.4% had had someone touch their sexual parts (boys 21.1%, girls 14.0%; $P < 0.001$). Most perpetrators were members of the extended family. The way to assist 'dysfunctional families', where 'family honour' and the need for peaceful relations with neighbours have priority over the mental health of female victims, is to propagate the finding that child sexual abuse has a wide-ranging deleterious impact on psychosocial functioning.

Child abuse and neglect may be defined as: repeated hurtful actions on the child by caregivers and other older persons, not in keeping with healthy child-rearing practice, involving physical, verbal or sexual acts, as well as denial of the child's basic needs for food, shelter, security and affection.

Arab scholars have sought to understand why such phenomena, in particular child sexual abuse (CSA), are prevalent in a highly conservative culture that should be a bastion of family values, including the protection of children's rights, and have suggested ways in which victims could be assisted, within the cultural norms (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999). Initially, they presented case histories to show that the issue was prevalent in Arab society (Doraiswamy & Al-Jabiry, 1987; and review by Al-Mahroos, 2007). However, there is a paucity of reports on the prevalence of CSA in national, community-based samples (Al-Fayez *et al.*, 2012); efforts have rather focused on small communities (Elbedour *et al.*, 2006), undergraduate students (Haj-Yahia & Tamish, 2001), or children and adolescents visiting social welfare centres (Usta & Farver, 2010).

Here, we revisit our previous work on child physical, psychological and sexual abuse in Kuwait (Al-Fayez *et al.*, 2012), with a focus on the sexual abuse data. We place the findings in the context of the local culture and discuss the impact of the conservative culture on the mental health of former victims of abuse. We had assessed the

lifetime prevalence of sexual abuse in a stratified random sample of Kuwaiti high-school students, and explored the association of CSA with parental characteristics, subjective quality of life (QOL), self-esteem, anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Method

In 2006, a nationwide sample of 4467 senior high-school students (mean age 16.9 years, s.d. 1.2, range 14–23) in Kuwaiti government secondary schools was studied (48.6% boys). All such schools are gender segregated. The protocol for the study was approved by the institutional review boards of the Kuwait Ministry of Education and the Kuwait Society for the Advancement of Arab Children (KSAAC).

Instruments

Finkelhor (1994) has suggested the need to select instruments with international comparison in mind. Accordingly, we used a modified version of a four-item sexual abuse questionnaire developed by MacMillan *et al.* (1997). All four items have a simple 'yes/no' response option, and a 'yes' response to any item was accepted as defining prevalence. The modified questionnaire reads:

As far as you can remember, did any adult ever do any of the following things to you:

- Deliberately exposed themselves to you more than once to attract your attention?
- Threatened to have sex with you?
- Touched the sex parts of your body to arouse you?
- Tried to have sex with you or sexually attacked you?

Also, we used modifications of questionnaires developed by Briere and Runtz for physical and psychological abuse, while items for anxiety and depression were selected from the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children, developed by Briere (details in Al-Fayez *et al.*, 2012). The questionnaires were translated into Arabic and checked by back-translation.

The research team critically examined the instruments for face validity. Thereafter, they were pilot tested among students (50 boys and 50 girls) who were not part of the main study.

Data were analysed by SPSS version 11.

Results

The 4467 participants hailed predominantly from fairly large, stable and harmonious family homes (the average number of children per family was 6.3; 85.1% of parents lived together; and 83.1% of respondents rated the parental relationship as

good or excellent). Most fathers were gainfully employed.

While 8.6% (boys 8.0%, girls 9.1%) claimed that someone had sexually attacked them, 5.9% reported that someone had threatened to have sex with them (boys 6.4%, girls 5.5%). There were no significant gender differences with regard to these more serious forms of sexual abuse. But with the less serious incidents – unwanted sexual exposure (15.3%; boys 22.2%, girls 8.9%), and someone touching their sexual parts (17.4%; boys 21.1%, girls 14.0%) – prevalence rates were significantly higher among the boys ($P < 0.001$). There were no significant age differences for the prevalence of the more serious forms of sexual abuse, but the less serious incidents were predominantly experienced by those aged 16–23 years (versus 14–15 years) ($\chi^2(3) = 45.6, P < 0.001$). The vast majority of perpetrators were members of the extended family.

Students with any history of sexual abuse scored significantly higher on the indices of psychological and physical abuse ($P < 0.001$). They also had significantly higher anxiety and depression scores, lower self-esteem scores, and lower subjective QOL domain scores ($P < 0.001$).

An analysis of covariance suggested that the perceived quality of the emotional relationship between the parents had a significant effect, such that those who perceived a better quality of relationship between their parents had significantly lower scores on all indices of abuse ($P < 0.001$). A noteworthy finding from the multiple regression analyses that included physical and psychological abuse data (details in Al-Fayez *et al.*, 2012) was that the lifetime psychological abuse score attributed to the mother (i.e. the child reporting psychological abuse perpetrated by the mother) was a significant predictor of self-esteem (it accounted for 11.5% of the variance in the dependent variable), anxiety (19.5% of the variance) and depression (19.7% of the variance).

Discussion

Within the limitations of a cross-sectional study that was based on recall, the high reliability indices of the questionnaires (test–retest and internal consistency – details in Al-Fayez *et al.*, 2012) indicate that the responses of the students were credible. The obstacles to understanding and dealing with child abuse in Arab societies include children's fear of the social consequences of admitting the truth of the experience (Sharma & Gupta, 2004). The high reliability indices indicate that, in the non-threatening atmosphere in which this study was conducted, affected students were able to express their views on the matter.

School authorities need this evidence base to motivate intervention programmes. The contents of such programmes should be shaped by the findings that children with any type of abuse seemed more likely to have other problems, the predictive power of psychological abuse by the mother, and the seemingly protective role of the child's perception of the parental relationship.

Comparative prevalence

While the more serious incidents of sexual abuse were not associated with significant gender differences in the Kuwaiti study, the Canadian study (MacMillan *et al.*, 1997) on which the sexual abuse questionnaire was modelled did find a gender difference for these forms of abuse (3.9% for men and 11.1% for women), in line with the international picture (Finkelhor, 1994). Our prevalence rates for the four indices of sexual abuse were at the lower end of the range of rates reported from other countries using similar measures (7–36% for women and 3–29% for men) (Finkelhor, 1994). Interestingly, a report from Palestine also found no gender difference in the prevalence of sexual abuse (Haj-Yahia & Tamish, 2001). It is possible that the strict sexual segregation in Arab cultures has contributed to this finding. This supports the call for an integrated approach to the study of child abuse (Haj-Yahia & Abdo-Kaloti, 2003).

Implications for the mental health of victims

In furthering an integrated approach, Abu-Baker (2013) and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (1999) noted the relatively low importance attached to the mental health of female victims of CSA, versus the premium that the culture places on 'family honour' and the need to maintain peaceful relations with the family of the perpetrator. Abu-Baker (2013) has suggested that families that are characterised in this way are 'dysfunctional' and that they offer 'solutions' that usually harm the victim, such as severe physical punishment for victims who insist on complaining. The way to assist such families is widely and persistently to publicise the finding that CSA has wide-ranging deleterious effects on children's psychosocial functioning. However, the plight of male victims has received scant attention in the Arab literature.

Conclusions

These findings support the universality of the experience of CSA and its impact. The correlates of child abuse elicited, especially the vulnerability of girls, should inform public health education on this issue.

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CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Risk-taking, revictimisation and perpetration of sexual violence in ten southern African countries

Neil Andersson

Professor of Family Medicine, McGill University, Montreal, Canada; Scientific Director, CIET, Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero, Mexico, email andersson@ciet.org

This paper reports the results of a cross-sectional survey of 11- to 16-year-old school-going youths in ten southern African countries. The survey instrument recorded both the experience of coerced sex and the perpetration of forced sex. There were prominent school and community risk factors for increased risk-taking behaviours, revictimisation and the perpetration of sexual violence. This supports the idea that the local culture can reinforce the antisocial consequences of sexual abuse of boys and girls. There was a suggestion that the school environment can compound the effects of child sexual abuse in terms of conscious knowledge, high-risk behaviour, the risk of revictimisation and disdain for the safety of others.

The mental health consequences of child sexual abuse include increased risk-taking behaviours, revictimisation (Lindgren *et al*, 1998; Cohen *et al*, 2000) and the perpetration of sexual violence (Kendall-Tackett *et al*, 1993). Even for those not directly involved, having a friend or neighbour who is a victim of sexual abuse contributes to an environment where sexual violence is expected and almost normal (Maman *et al*, 2000; Todd *et al*, 2004).

Our recent cross-sectional surveys in ten southern African countries (Andersson *et al*, 2012) looked at the prevalence of child sexual abuse at two time points (2003 and 2007). The facilitated self-administered questionnaire documented both the experience of coerced sex and the perpetration of forced sex, as well as associated risk factors, among 11- to 16-year-old school-going youths.

The study population was a stratified (urban/rural) random sample of census enumeration areas in Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique,

Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, covering 25–30 enumeration areas in each country. The 445 schools were those serving these areas that included grades 6–9 (students aged 11–17 years). Detailed field methods are described by Andersson *et al* (2012).

Frequency and risk factors of abuse in boys and girls

There is increasing recognition that boys are frequently the victims of child sexual abuse. In our study, 20% of female students (weighted value based on 4432/25 840) and 21% of male students (4080/21 613) aged 11–16 years across the region reported suffering coerced sex. We found very few differences in risk factors for child sexual abuse between male and female respondents. Older children (over 13 years old) and those living in very poor households (insufficient food in the last week) were more likely to report having been victims of forced sex.

Children were at higher risk of abuse if they attended schools where fewer students knew about children's rights. Other risk factors included living in a community where a higher proportion of adults were in favour of transactional sex. Communities reporting higher than average rates of violence against an intimate partner also had a higher risk of child sexual abuse.

Differences between victims and non-victims

Across all ten countries, victims of child sexual abuse reported lower levels of knowledge about children's rights and appropriate child care than did non-victims. They had less helpful attitudes about masculinity and sexuality, and lower levels of self-efficacy. Although the mental health consequences of their experiences varied from child