Child Abuse – A Burning Challenge Comprehensive Review Paper

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Abstract: -

Child abuse is a multifaceted and pervasive issue that transcends geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic boundaries. This review paper provides a comprehensive examination of child abuse, encompassing its various forms, underlying factors, consequences, and preventive measures. The paper explores the different types of child abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect, highlighting their distinct characteristics and impacts on children's well-being. It delves into the complex interplay of individual, familial, societal, and cultural factors that contribute to the occurrence and perpetuation of child abuse.

Moreover, the paper discusses the detrimental effects of child abuse on children's physical health, psychological development, social relationships, and overall quality of life. It underscores the importance of early identification and intervention in mitigating the adverse outcomes of child abuse and promoting healing and resilience among affected children.

Furthermore, the review examines various strategies and interventions aimed at preventing and addressing child abuse, including legislative measures, community-based programs, educational initiatives, and support services for children and families. It emphasizes the significance of multidisciplinary collaboration and concerted efforts across sectors to combat child abuse effectively. Overall, this review paper offers insights into the complexities of child abuse, underscores the urgency of addressing this pervasive issue, and provides a foundation for future research and action to protect children's rights and well-being.

Keywords: - Child abuse, Physical abuse, Emotional abuse, Sexual abuse, Consequences, Prevention, Children's rights.

Introduction: -

Child abuse is a pervasive social stigma encompassing various forms of harm inflicted upon children by parents or caregivers. This includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, as well as neglect and exploitation. Such mistreatment can occur in various settings, including homes, schools, institutions, and public spaces. Regardless of the context, child abuse causes profound physical and emotional suffering, impeding a child's health, well-being, and fundamental rights.

Child abuse encompasses a variety of detrimental actions toward children under 18, affecting both boys and girls. These harmful experiences often lead to the development of behavioral problems in victims, who may struggle with feelings of guilt, low self-worth, fear, and a lack of trust in adults, ultimately leading to their social isolation. The repercussions of such abuse are usually profound and enduring, negatively affecting the victims' emotional and psychological growth.

To combat child abuse, the Indian Central Government collaborates with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Furthermore, the Juvenile Justice Act of 2015 offers protection to minors from physical and sexual abuse, guiding Indian parents and those responsible for child care through community counseling.

Current Status: -

Between 2014 and 2022, there has been a notable surge in crimes against children, rising from 89,423 cases to 1,62,449 cases, marking an 81% increase over the span of nine years. **(NCRB report 2023).**

Why does Child Abuse Occur?

Child abuse stems from various factors, spanning from individual struggles like low self-esteem or social isolation to broader societal issues such as community violence and poverty-related stress. The specific causes of abuse vary depending on the type of maltreatment and the circumstances of the perpetrator. However, individuals with low frustration tolerance, inadequate coping skills, and misconceptions about parenting are more prone to perpetrate abuse. Regardless of economic status, race, ethnicity, or religious background, child abuse affects all segments of society. Unfortunately, it is more prevalent in families facing economic, housing, or personal challenges, experiencing isolation, struggling with anger management or stress, or dealing with physical or mental health issues.

Theoretical Approaches: -

The psychiatric perspective on child abuse, put forward by researchers such as Kempe (1978), Gelles (1973), and Park and Collmer (1975), associates child abuse with factors like mental disorders, personality flaws, or abnormalities within the individual. This viewpoint suggests that abusive behaviors in parents may be traced back to their troubled childhoods, leading to underdeveloped personalities and a lack of self-discipline. The theory posits that personality disorders play a key role in child abuse, with findings indicating that abusers are often predisposed to impulsive or antisocial behavior that goes beyond just a lack of restraint. According to this theory, a parent might mistreat their child due to unfulfilled emotional needs, which manifest as dissatisfaction, anger, or irritability, a failure to align the child's needs and capabilities with their expectations, or emotional wounds from their own experiences of abuse or neglect, thereby impairing their ability to nurture their children effectively (Wolfe, 1987: 45).

The social control theory, introduced by Gelles in 1973, posits that parents resort to violence against their children when they believe there are minimal consequences for doing so, such as lack of retaliation from the child or fear of legal repercussions only if a neighbor reports the abuse to authorities. According to this perspective, violence occurs when (i) the perceived benefits outweigh the risks, (ii) ineffective social control within the family reduces the repercussions of violence, and (iii) family structures weaken social control mechanisms, thereby diminishing the costs and amplifying the rewards of violence (Gelles and Cornell, 1985: 121). Laslett (1978: 480) also argues that (a) disparities within the household diminish social control and lessen the deterrents to violence, and (b) the privacy inherent in family life diminishes external oversight of familial interactions. Gelles (1973) further suggests that certain categories of children—such as those with disabilities, physical unattractiveness, demanding behaviour, or premature birth—are more susceptible to parental abuse. This vulnerability stems from either their heightened demands on parents economically, socially, or psychologically or their perceived failure to reciprocate sufficient gratification for the parents' investment of time and energy. Thus, parental violence is likely to occur when the costs of parenthood are perceived to outweigh the rewards.

Ivan Nye (1979), akin to Gelles, initially applied Peter Blau's theory to understand child abuse. Nye suggested that instances of child beating are less prevalent in families with nearby relatives and/or friends. Reframing Nye's proposition, Gelles and Cornell (1985) proposed that child beating becomes more prevalent in situations where relatives, friends, and

neighbours (i.e., non-family members) are absent, unable, or unwilling to engage in daily family interactions, thereby failing to serve as agents of both formal and informal social control. Gelles further argues that the greater the perceived disparity between the investment in family relationships (i.e., parenting) and the perceived returns on that investment, the higher the likelihood of violence. This also elucidates why children aged five to seven are more vulnerable to abuse compared to those aged 14 to 16. Parents of younger children perceive a substantial investment in parenting with relatively meager returns, unlike parents of older children.

Physical abuse in children, as outlined by Sloan (1983: 2-3), typically manifests through identifiable signs such as bruises, burns, fractures, lacerations, abrasions, abdominal injuries, and human-bite marks. Behavioral cues indicating physical abuse include a child's wariness of adult contact, apprehension in response to other children's distress, displays of aggression, apparent fear of parents or caregivers, and reluctance or tears when it's time to return home.

The Victims of Abuse

Kewalramani conducted an empirical study on child abuse in Rajasthan, aiming to understand its nature, extent, patterns, and causes. The study focused on 167 children aged 10-16 years, exploring the characteristics of both perpetrators and victims of abuse, as well as the impact of abuse on a child's role performance and development. Among the cases studied, 124 involved physical abuse, 23 involved sexual abuse, and 103 involved emotional abuse, with some children experiencing multiple forms of abuse. Of the total cases, 61.7% were boys and 38.3% were girls. Among boys, 42.7% were employed while 57.3% were not, whereas among girls, 46.9% were employed and 53.1% were not.

Physical Abuse on Victims

Physical abuse entails causing physical harm to a child, which can encompass actions such as burning, hitting, punching, shaking, kicking, beating, or any other form of injury. While the parent or caretaker may not have intended to harm the child, it can occur due to excessive discipline or physical punishment that is unsuitable for the child's age.

Several patterns emerge regarding physical abuse: (a) Boys are more frequently abused than girls, with a ratio of 1.3:1. (b) School-going children face a higher risk of physical abuse compared to non-school-going children. (c) Older children aged 14-16 experience more physical abuse than younger ones aged 10-13. (d) Non-working children are subjected to

more beatings than working children. (e) The ratio of occasional abuse (twice or thrice a month) to frequent abuse (once or twice a week) is approximately 1:5. (f) About 60% of abused children come from poor families, indicating a significant link between poverty and physical abuse. (g) In 93% of cases, family members (e.g., fathers, mothers, siblings) are the perpetrators of physical abuse. (h) Perpetrators of either gender tend to abuse children of the same gender more often. (i) Mothers are responsible for 60% of physical abuse cases, while fathers account for 40%, with males generally inflicting more severe abuse. (j) The majority of abusive parents are in their thirties and forties, while siblings are mostly teenagers. (k) Common methods of abuse include slapping and fist beating (40%), hitting with objects (35%), kicking (19%), choking/strangulation (10%), binding with rope (3%), and hair pulling (2%). (l) In 85% of cases, beatings do not result in visible injuries. (m) Physical violence against children encompasses routine beating, where both parents and children perceive it as deserved, and non-routine beating, which may be instigated by the child. Secondary violence occurs when one parent perceives it as just while the other deems it unjust.

Sexual Abuse on Victims

Sexual abuse refers to inappropriate sexual conduct involving a child. It encompasses instances where a child is engaged in sexual activity beyond their comprehension, incapable of giving informed consent, or in violation of societal norms or laws. Factors such as poverty, age, gender, caste, absence of safe environments, inadequate schooling, and lack of suitable institutional care for children from dysfunctional families increase the vulnerability of children to sexual abuse. (a) Girls are disproportionately more affected by sexual abuse compared to boys, with a ratio of 2.3:1. (b) A significant portion of sexual abuse incidents occur when children are 14 years or older, with victims above 14 years outnumbering those below 14 by a ratio of 1:5. (c) Gender plays a role in the number of abusers involved, as males tend to experience abuse from a single person, while girls are typically assaulted by multiple individuals. (d) Force or physical harm is rarely employed in sexual abuse cases; instead, perpetrators often manipulate victims psychologically through loyalty, affection, and dependency. (e) Victims of sexual abuse are predominantly from lower socio-economic backgrounds. (f) There is minimal correlation between childhood sexual abuse and religious or caste affiliation, though lower caste women may face a higher risk of sexual assault. (g) While victims' ages vary, assailants' ages exhibit greater diversity, spanning from very young to late middle age. (h) Approximately 66.7% of perpetrators have secondary relationships

with victims, such as employers, coworkers, teachers, tenants, or acquaintances, indicating that a large majority of child sexual abuse occurs outside the family. (i) Boys commonly experience abuse related to employment, whereas girls are more often victims of acquaintance-related abuse. (j) In 2018, the National Crime Record Bureau reported a significant rise in sexual offenses against children, with 35% of reported abuses being perpetrated by neighbors or known individuals, including friends, relatives, and caretakers, according to data compiled by Childline.

Emotional Abuse on Victims

Emotional abuse, alternatively referred to as verbal abuse, mental abuse, or psychological maltreatment, encompasses various behaviors that hinder a child's emotional and social development. This form of abuse involves neglecting to offer an environment conducive to the child's emotional growth and social skills. Acts of emotional abuse may include restricting movement, consistently belittling or denigrating the child, issuing threats, inducing fear, engaging in discriminatory behavior, ridiculing, or employing other non-physical means of hostile or rejecting treatment.

(a) Boys experience emotional maltreatment more frequently than girls, with a ratio of 1.3:1. (b) Neglect is equally prevalent among both working and non-working children. (c) School-going children face slightly higher rates of maltreatment compared to non-school-going children. (d) Various forms of emotional abuse include lack of supervision (62%), belittling (50%), false blaming (33%), lack of concern for studies and welfare (28%), rejection (18%), and unequal treatment with siblings (17%). (e) Parents' levels of interest in children follow a ratio of 5:3:1 for 'no' interest, 'less' interest, and 'average' interest, respectively. (f) In 76% of cases, neglectful parents typically have low income, numerous liabilities, are middle-aged, illiterate, or less educated, and work low-status jobs. (g) Parents who mistreat their children often exhibit aggressive, irritable, and domineering behavior, along with emotional inflexibility and low self-esteem, as well as a lack of empathy and social skills.

Causes of Child Abuse

The primary reason behind child abuse is adaptational failure or environmental maladjustment, primarily attributable to adult perpetrators such as parents and employers, as well as to some degree, adults responsible for family socialization (Kewalramani, 1992: 152).

Physical Abuse

Various scholars propose different explanations for physical abuse. While some attribute it to the psycho-pathology of individual perpetrators, others highlight the psycho-social dynamics within family interactions, and some emphasize acute stress situations. However, Kewalramani's empirical study in Rajasthan indicates that family-related stress factors offer a comprehensive explanation for child abuse. The study identified four dominant models of causation for physical abuse: (a) marital relations, (b) parent-child relations, (c) structural stressors, and (d) stress originating from the child.

Sexual Abuse

Conventional views attribute sexual abuse to perpetrator adjustment issues, family disorganization, victim characteristics, and abuser psychological disorders, Kewalramani's 1992 study took a systemic approach. It considered sexual abuse as behavior influenced by multiple factors across different levels. This systems model was also applied to study physical and emotional abuse. Variables related to sexual abuse include family environment, structure, individual predispositions, and situational factors. The analysis revealed that family congestion wasn't linked to sexual abuse. Instead, conflicts between parents, weakened inhibitions leading to neglect, absence of affectionate parent-child relationships, male alcoholism, lack of accountability, inadequate child control, mother's illicit relationships, stepfather dominance, and family social isolation were more significant factors in sexual abuse.

Emotional Abuse

Four significant causes of emotional abuse include poverty, inadequate parental control, strained family relationships, maltreatment experienced by parents in their own childhood (intergenerational transmission), and parental alcoholism. Kewalramani's research corroborates these findings, with over half of abusive parents experiencing low income and large family sizes. While poverty is a predominant factor in child abuse, it is not exclusive to lower socioeconomic status situations. Kewalramani found deficient parental control in 52% of cases and intergenerational transmission of maltreatment in 79% of cases.

Effects of Abuse on Children

Bolton and Bolton (1987: 93-113) have outlined eight potential effects of abuse on children: self-devaluation, dependency, mistrust, revictimization, withdrawal from social interactions, emotional trauma, deviant behavior, and interpersonal difficulties.

Kewalramani's research on child abuse highlights five significant impacts on children. Firstly, abused children often experience a loss of self-esteem, characterized by a negative self-perception. Abused children find themselves trapped in their abusive situations, unable to escape as the perpetrators are often their parents. Moreover, due to their poverty and dependence, they must endure hostility from caregivers and employers.

The second effect pertains to dependency, where a child's reliance shifts from parents or caretakers to teachers for fulfilling their needs. Operationalizing dependency through three indicators—the satisfaction of physical needs (food, clothing, and medical care), emotional and social support, and the need for employment—the study found that: (a) 50% of child victims felt dissatisfied with the fulfilment of their physical needs; (b) 55% relied on others for emotional and social support; and (c) 63% were compelled to seek employment. Despite the abuse, many children continued to depend. Additionally, a significant number engaged in deviant activities, as indicated by absenteeism from school and work, drug addiction, theft, and hostility towards perpetrators. Emotionally and sexually abused victims exhibited frequent school absenteeism (58% to 80%) and work absenteeism (74% to 77%), with a notable proportion engaging in substance abuse (8% to 10%), theft (18%), and displaying hostility towards perpetrators (48% to 78%). This suggests that child abuse contributes to varying degrees and types of deviance among victims.

The third effect concerns social and interpersonal difficulties stemming from child abuse, as revealed by the 1992 study (p. 136). These difficulties include poor communication skills, inadequate coping mechanisms, difficulty in forming intimate relationships, mistrust, and withdrawal from social interactions. To assess these effects, victims were questioned about their leisure activities, relationships with family members, experiences of embarrassment, willingness to confide in friends during stressful times, and thoughts of leaving their families. Findings indicate that: (a) a majority of victims (68% to 83%) avoided expected social interactions, preferring solitude during leisure time; (b) only a small percentage desired to distance themselves from their families; (c) a significant portion (76%) had strained or hostile relationships with parents/caretakers and/or siblings; (d) few victims (24%) had trustworthy confidants; (e) while abuse caused embarrassment, its intensity varied depending on the type.

These observations underscore the tendency for child abuse victims to experience distinct social and interpersonal challenges.

The final effect of child abuse is revictimization, where a previously abused child is at increased risk of being abused again. This is assessed through three indicators: the frequency of abuse, the number of perpetrators, and the variety of abusive behaviors experienced. Findings from the study reveal that: (a) a significant majority of children (65% to 84%) experienced abuse regularly or frequently; (b) a considerable portion of victims (53% to 58%) of physical and emotional abuse (excluding sexual abuse) were victimized by multiple perpetrators; and (c) a notable proportion of victims of physical and emotional abuse (66% to 80%) experienced abuse in multiple forms.

Prevention of Child Abuse

In the realm of preventing child abuse, there are two main approaches: primary and secondary prevention. Primary prevention involves actions aimed at preventing child abuse from happening in the first place, while secondary prevention involves steps taken after abuse or neglect has already occurred, to prevent its recurrence through treatment.

1. **Volunteer your time: -** Offer your time as a volunteer. Engage with fellow parents in your neighbourhood. Support disadvantaged children and their families. Initiate a playgroup.

2. **Discipline your children thoughtfully**: - Exercise thoughtful discipline with your children. Avoid disciplining them when you're emotional; take time to compose yourself. Understand that discipline serves as a means of teaching your child. Utilize privileges to reinforce positive behavior and time-outs to aid your child in regaining composure.

3. **Examine your behavior: -** Evaluate your conduct carefully. Understand that abuse extends beyond physical actions; words and behaviors can also cause profound and enduring harm. Embrace nurturing parenting practices. Demonstrate through your actions that conflicts can be resolved without resorting to physical violence or raised voices.

4. **Educate yourself and others: -** Providing basic assistance to children and parents can be highly effective in preventing child abuse. Activities after school, classes for parental education, mentorship initiatives, and respite care services are among the

diverse methods to safeguard children from harm. Advocate for these endeavors within your community.

5. **Teach children their rights: -** When children are educated that they are unique and entitled to safety, they are less inclined to blame themselves for abuse and more inclined to report perpetrators.

6. **Support prevention programs: -** Frequently, intervention occurs solely after abuse has been reported. There is a pressing need for increased investments in programs that have demonstrated efficacy in preventing abuse before it happens, such as family counseling and home visits conducted by nurses who offer support for newborns and their parents.

7. **Know what child abuse is: -** Physical and sexual abuse are unmistakable forms of mistreatment, but neglect, which involves parents or caregivers failing to provide necessary food, clothing, and care, also falls under this category. Emotional abuse can occur when children experience rejection, verbal abuse, or persistent isolation.

8. **Know the signs: -** Beyond unexplained injuries, there are numerous indicators of abuse. These include depression, a specific adult inducing fear, struggles with trust or forming friendships, abrupt alterations in eating or sleeping habits, inappropriate sexual conduct, inadequate hygiene, secrecy, and hostility. These signs often point towards underlying family issues and may suggest neglect or various forms of abuse—physical, sexual, or emotional—being inflicted upon the child.

9. **Report abuse: -** Should you witness a child being harmed or encounter signs of abuse, promptly notify your state's child protective services department or local law enforcement. When discussing abuse with a child, attentively listen, reassure them that confiding in an adult was the correct action, and affirm that they bear no responsibility for the situation.

10. **Invest in kids: -** Urge community leaders to offer support to children and families. Advocate for employers to create work environments conducive to family needs. Call upon both local and national legislators to endorse legislation aimed at enhancing child protection and enhancing their overall well-being.

Child Abuse Laws in India

Child abuse presents a pervasive and concerning issue in India, affecting millions of children annually through physical, emotional, and sexual harm. From 2017 to 2020, there were 24

Lakhs reported cases of child abuse, with 80% of victims being girls under the age of 14. The Government of India has instituted various legal measures to safeguard children from abuse, focusing on prevention, detection, and prosecution of offenders. According to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, child abuse encompasses physical, sexual, emotional, or economic mistreatment, including neglect, abandonment, exploitation, and other forms of harmful treatment.

The Constitution of India ensures the rights of children: -

Article 21A mandates free and compulsory primary education for all children aged 6-14 years.

Article 24(a) guarantees protection from hazardous employment until the age of 14. Children possess the same rights as adult citizens of India, including the Right to Equality (Article 14), Right to Personal Liberty and due process of law (Article 21), and protection from trafficking and forced bonded labor (Article 23), among others.

Child protection laws in India are crafted by constitutional provisions aimed at safeguarding the rights of children. Over 250 statutes have been enacted by both the Union and State Governments. Some significant legislations and their key provisions include:

Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC)

- Section 75 addresses punishment for cruelty towards a child, while Section 76 covers punishment for abetting the suicide of a child.
- Abandonment of a child below twelve years of age is addressed under Section 317, with imprisonment of up to seven years or a fine or both as punishment.
- Section 366A deals with inducing any minor girl to engage in sexual intercourse with another person, punishable by imprisonment of up to ten years and a fine.
- Sections 372 and 373 of the act criminalize the selling or buying of minor girls for prostitution and illicit intercourse for any unlawful or immoral purpose. Offenders may face imprisonment of up to ten years along with a fine.

In addition, following the enactment of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, the severity of punishment for the rape of a minor girl has been increased under section 376(2)(i) of the IPC. The minimum sentence for rape of females under 16 years of age is now ten years of rigorous imprisonment, with the possibility of extending to life imprisonment.

Included below are child protection laws enacted by the Union Government:

The Children Pledging of Labour Act, 1933 (CPLA), prohibits parents and employers from engaging children who have been pledged for labor.

The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 (CLA) is legislation aimed at safeguarding children from engaging in labor in India. This law prohibits children from working in hazardous occupations and establishes a minimum age requirement for employment in any type of work.

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1987 (ITPA), criminalizes the act of procuring, transporting, or hiring individuals for sexual exploitation or involvement in prostitution. Additionally, this legislation prohibits the trafficking of children for any purpose, irrespective of their gender.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (POCMA) is founded on two fundamental principles:

1. Engaging a child in marriage constitutes an offense.
2. A child or minor is defined as an individual under 18 years of age for girls and under 21 years for boys.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, formerly a Directive Principle of State Policy, has been integrated into fundamental rights, specifically Article 21A. This mandates that the State provide free and compulsory education within ten years under the Right to Education. The RTE Act delineates the procedures and significance of ensuring free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14 years in India.

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSOA), was introduced to combat and deter instances of sexual harassment, exploitation, assault, pornography-related offenses, and immoral acts perpetrated against children. According to this legislation, sexual abuse of a child encompasses any action that involves physical interaction with a child or induces the child to experience sexual arousal or stimulation. This encompasses both penetrative and non-penetrative forms of sexual assault, as well as instances of sexual harassment and exploitation.

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (JJA) is legislation in India governing the handling of underage offenders. Enacted on January 15, 2016, it replaces the prior Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000. According to JJA, a child is defined as an individual under 18 years of age, categorized as either a 'child in conflict with law' or a 'child in need of care and protection'. The Act establishes Juvenile

Justice Boards and Child Welfare Committees to address these categories, ensuring children's rights are safeguarded and their development is prioritized. JJA mandates the establishment of special homes and observation homes to provide shelter, care, and protection for vulnerable children. Notably, the Act permits the trial of certain juveniles aged 16 to 18 years as adults if accused of serious crimes.

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) is established under the Ministry of Women and Child Development by the central government. Its mandate includes overseeing all laws and initiatives with a focus on children's welfare. Additionally, the commission has the authority to independently investigate instances of child rights violations.

Under the auspices of **the Woman and Child Development Department, the Child Welfare Committee (CWC)** is established to address the needs of vulnerable children requiring care and protection. In the event of child abuse, law enforcement is required to notify the Committee within 24 hours, after which a designated individual is assigned to provide support and oversee the child's psychosocial welfare. This individual also maintains communication with the child's family regarding the case. Incidents of child abuse can be reported by dialing the toll-free number 1098.

Conclusion

Child abuse demands severe punishment for offenders due to the strong societal aversion towards them. In India, child abuse profoundly impacts infants and adolescents, often leaving lasting trauma. Children are vulnerable to abuse in various settings, including homes, neighborhoods, schools, and boarding hostels. Many instances of abuse go unreported, as children may choose not to disclose the harm inflicted upon them. Therefore, parents, relatives, and caregivers must be vigilant and recognize signs of abuse, such as changes in behavior, anger issues, loss of appetite, distrust, and physical injuries indicative of inflicted pain. Since 2012, the country has been implementing child protection policies aimed at combating the pervasive issue of parental abuse in India.

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