

Circumstances affecting women's vulnerability to sexual offence as reported in a tertiary level health care institute of a metro city in India

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Abstract

Introduction: The incidence of sexual offence against women are increasing all over the world. The circumstances which predispose a woman to become a victim of these incidences are multiple. Perpetrators take advantage of these circumstances to commit sexual offence. Understanding these circumstances is essential to prevent sexual offence against women. **Objectives:** This study attempts to find out the circumstances under which victims of sexual offence fall prey to the perpetrators. **Methods:** This Observational Descriptive study was conducted at the Upgraded Department of Forensic and State Medicine, Medical College, Kolkata, for a period of one year among all the victims of sexual offence reported for medical examination. **Results:** The study reveals 63% of the victims are in their life course of adolescence and young adulthood (15-25 years), only 4% of them belong to upper socio-economic status as per Prasad's Scale, modified for 2013, 78% of the study population have not passed any board examination. Poverty and support to family (30%) and promise of marriage (27%) are two most common circumstances affecting women's vulnerability to sexual offence, In both these circumstances majority of them are in their adolescence and young adulthood (15-25 years), not passed any board examination and from the middle and lower socioeconomic status (Level II, III, IV & V of B G Prasad's Scale).

Keywords: Sexual offence, victim, circumstances.

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Introduction

Sexual violence is common. 1 in 3 women experienced sexual violence involving physical contact; about 1 in 5 women have experienced completed or attempted rape in their lifetime. Sexual violence starts early. 1 in 3 female rape victims experienced it for the first time between 11-17 years old and 1 in 9 reported that it occurred before age 10[1]. As per the ecological model of violence, chosen by WHO, factors increasing women's vulnerability to sexual offence are individual factors, relationship factors, community factors and societal factors. The identification of risk factors is critically important for informing strategies and programmes to ameliorate or buffer against risk – and ultimately to guide prevention policy. Over 50 risk factors were identified for intimate partner violence and/or sexual violence – most at the individual and family/relationship levels[2]. Ability of a woman to suspect or identify circumstances which make them vulnerable to the perpetrators for committing sexual offences is the crucial protective factor against those offences. This may be particularly so if the victim is in early stage of her life course. This observational descriptive study was conducted to find out the circumstances under which victims of sexual offence fall prey to the perpetrators.

Material and Methods

This was an observational descriptive study, with institution based data collection. The study was conducted at the Upgraded Department of Forensic and State Medicine, in a premier medical teaching institute, Kolkata, West Bengal, for a period of one year (1st January 2013 to 31st December 2013), on the victims of sexual offence brought for medical examination. The research activity included obtaining permission, structuring and pretesting of schedule, anonymous data collection, compilation, analysis and write up. Sample size is complete enumeration i.e. all the victims of sexual offence brought for medical examination during the study period. Ethical clearance was obtained from the competent authority after ensuring that the data collection would be anonymous, no photographs taken or any data procured which could reveal the identity of the victim. The victim of sexual offence is brought by the police with a requisition and /or order from the legal authority for conduction of a medical examination. The victim is identified by the police personnel following which informed consent for medical examination is taken from the victim or her legal guardian (if she is minor, mentally unsound or unable to give consent for any other reason). The victim is then interviewed using the pre designed, pre tested and semi-structured questionnaire. The data was compiled in Microsoft Excel and analyzed by using simple table. For the purpose of understanding and preventing intimate partner and sexual violence, the life course is divided into: infancy (0–4 years), childhood and early adolescence (5–14 years); adolescence and young adulthood (15–25 years); adulthood (26 years and over); and all ages [3]. This age division is also followed in this study.

B G Prasad's Scale modified for 2013 was used in this study to determine Socio Economic Status of the victims [4]. The study population is grouped as Upper Class – I, Upper Middle and Middle

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Middle Class – II & III and Lower Middle and Lower Class – IV & V.

A person is deemed as literate if he or she can read and write with understanding in any language. It was decided in the 1991 census to use the term literacy rate for the population relating to 7 years age and

above [5]. This is also followed in this study. In this study, victims who are literate but not passed class X examination was considered having primary education, those who have passed class X examination were considered having secondary and above level of education.

Observations and results

Table 1: Distribution of the study population according to their age in years (n=63)

Age of the respondent (in years)	Frequency	Percent
Infancy (0—4 years)	1	2
Childhood and early adolescence (5—14 years)	14	22
Adolescence and young adulthood (15—25 years)	40	63
Adulthood (26 years and above)	8	13
Total	63	100

Table 2: Distribution of the study population according to their Socio-Economic Status (n=50)

SES - Per capita monthly income in Rs. (Prasad's Scale, modified for 2013)	Frequency	Percent
5156 & above (Upper Class) - I	2	4%
2578 - 5155 (Upper Middle Class) – II & 1547 - 2577 (Middle Middle Class) - III	27	54%
773 - 1547 (Lower Middle Class) – IV & Below 773 (Lower Class) - V	21	42%
Total	50	100%

Note: 13 respondents could not state their family income

Table 3: Distribution of study population according to their level of education (n= 63)

Level of education	Frequency	Percent
Illiterate	18	29
Primary	31	49
Secondary and above	14	22
Total	63	100

Table 4: Distribution of the study population according to the circumstances affecting women's vulnerability to sexual offence (n=63)

Precipitating cause of offence	Frequency	Percentage
Promise of marriage	17	27
Promise of job	2	3
Poverty and to support family	19	30
Temptation by accused	9	14
Threat	4	6
At own will	1	2
Sold to brothel	5	8
Does not know	6	10
Total	63	100

Table 5: Distribution of the study population according to their circumstances affecting women's vulnerability to sexual offence in relation to their age, level of education and SE

Circumstances Precipitating the Offence	Overall		Age of victim								Level of education of victim						SES								
			Infancy (0-4 years)		Childhood and early adolescence (5-14 years)		Adolescence and young adulthood (15-25 years)		Adulthood (26 years and above)		Illiterate	Primary	Secondary & above	I	II&III	IV&V	Not known								
			0—4	5—14	15—25	26 & above	I	II&III	IV&V	Not known															
Promise of marriage	17	27	0	0	4	2	1	2	3	3	3	1	0	2	5	36	0	0	6	2	5	2	6	4	
Promise of job	2	3	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	1	2	1	5	0	0	1	07	0	0	1	4	0	0	1	8
Poverty and to support family	19	30	0	0	0	0	1	4	1	1	5	2	1	3	4	29	1	5	1	4	7	3	1	8	
Temptation by accused	9	14	1	1	8	5	0	0	0	0	5	2	4	1	0	00	0	0	1	4	7	3	1	8	
Threat	4	6	0	0	2	1	0	0	2	2	1	5	1	3	2	14	0	0	2	8	2	9	0	0	

At own will	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	8	
Sold to brothel	5	8	0	0	0	0	5	1	0	0	2	1	3	1	0	0	0	0	2	8	1	4	2	1
Does not know	6	1	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	1	1	0	3	1	2	14	1	5	3	1	1	4	1	8
Total	6	1	0	1	1	1	4	1	8	1	1	1	3	1	14	10	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1
	3	0	1	0	4	0	0	0		0	8	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	3	0	3	0
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0				0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Discussion

Young women are usually found to be more at risk of rape than older women [6,7,8]. According to data from justice systems and rape crisis centres in Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Peru and the United States, between one-third and two-thirds of all victims of sexual assault are aged 15 years or less [7,8].87% of the victims in this study population experienced sexual perpetration before they reach adulthood i.e. 26 years of age. 2 out of 3 victims in this study are in the age group of adolescence and young adulthood (15-25 years) and 2 out of 9 are in the age group childhood and early adolescence (5-14 years).Women are at increased risk of sexual violence, as they are of physical violence by an intimate partner, when they become more educated and thus more empowered [9]. The likely explanation is that greater empowerment brings with it more resistance from women to patriarchal norms [10]; so that men may resort to violence in an attempt to regain control. The relationship between empowerment and physical violence is an inverted U-shape – with greater empowerment conferring greater risk up to a certain level, beyond which it starts to become protective [11]. It is not known, though, whether this is also the case for sexual violence [9]. 29% victims in this study are illiterate, 49% have primary education and 22% of them have secondary and higher level of education, also shows an inverted U-shape pattern.Poor women and girls may be more at risk of rape in the course of their daily tasks than those who are better off, for example when they walk home on their own from work late at night, or work in the fields or collect firewood alone. Children of poor women may have less parental supervision when not in school, since their mothers may be at work and unable to afford child care. The children themselves may, in fact, be working and thus vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Poverty forces many women and girls into occupations that carry a relatively high risk of sexual violence [12], particularly sex work [13]. It also creates enormous pressures for them to find or maintain jobs, to pursue trading activities and, if studying, to obtain good grades – all of which render them vulnerable to sexual coercion from those who can promise these things [14]. Poorer women are also more at risk of intimate partner violence, of which sexual violence is often a manifestation [15,16].Only 4% of the victims in this study belong to upper class while 54% belong to upper middle and middle middle class and 42 % are in lower and lower middle class socio-economic status as per Prasad’s Scale, modified for 2013.

Conclusion

Poverty and support to family (30%) and promise of marriage (27%) are two most common circumstances affecting women’s vulnerability to sexual offence in this study population. In both these circumstances majority of the victims are in their adolescence and young adulthood (15-25 years) having primary level of education (not passed class X examination) and from middle and lower socioeconomic status (Level II,III,IV & V of B G Prasad’s Scale)(Table: 5).14% of the victims in this study population are tempted by the perpetrator and they are mostly in lower age group, childhood and early adolescence (5-14 years) having lower level of education, illiterate and primary and from comparatively lower socioeconomic status (Level IV & V of B G Prasad’s Scale)(Table: 5).8% of the study population stated that they were sold to brothel. All of them are in their adolescence and young

adulthood (15-25 years), none of them passed class X and no one is from upper class of SES(Table: 5).

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