

Sexual Abuses against Visually Impaired Girls: Patterns and Consequences in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to explore the patterns of sexual abuses against visually impaired (VI) girls and to find out the consequences of these events. Through a mixed research design sixty VI adolescent girls are selected purposively. For collecting data, a semi-structured interview schedule, FGD and case studies are used as tools. So, exploring the real situation both qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously. From the study, it has appeared that, though almost all the VI girls had a basic idea about 'sexual abuse', after that due to lack of their eyesight and proper prevention knowledge and training they become the easiest victims. It has also emerged that total blind girls faced more severe incidents than that of

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girls with low vision. Perpetrators from their kith and kin and neighborhood targeted total blind girls as they are unable to identify them, VI girls from lower and middle-class society become much more victims than upper-class society. And the most remarkable point of this study is that now perpetrators are using modern technological equipment for abusing girls but these girls are not aware enough about this new trend. Last of all, it has clearly appeared that, abuse has a dark deep effect on them and from this study it is also evoked that physical beauty is adorable in our society for becoming eye-catching in men eye but for becoming sexually abused, physical beauty or deformity do not play any noteworthy role.

Key words: Sexual abuse, visual impairment, blindness, consequences.

INTRODUCTION

Visual impairment is one kind of disability which is related to vision and sexual abuse means abused a person sexually. There is an intense relationship between Sexual abuse against girls and disability. Actually, sexual abuse against girls can be the cause of disability; conversely as a consequence of sexual harassment, disability of a girl can become more concentrated. But there have very few studies and publications (written and spoken) about the sexual violence against visually impaired (VI) girls in Bangladeshi perspective. Asexual image of disabled girls in society is a major barrier to this. Sexual abuse with children has been addressed in Bangladesh since the early 1990s (Slugget, 2003) and sexual abuse of children with disabilities is an under covered phenomenon in Bangladesh. Mahmood & Ferdous (2014) found that there are many reasons for not the depiction of the phenomenon. According to DisAbled Women's Network², (2003) it is also disclosed that our existing tendency of blaming the victims themselves for their dressing and physical attractiveness does not somehow fit in with the image of visually impaired girls, who due to their physical deformity fail to meet the common perception of girls as

² DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) was founded in 1985

a symbol of “Beauty”. Considering these, girls with disabilities are supposed as non-sexual and are not often given sex education. Remaining unaware about sexual issues, disabled children suffers more vulnerability to all forms of abuse and also less likely to be protected from harm than their non-disabled peers (Cooke, 2000; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; NSPCC, 2003).

It is true that sexual violence against Blind and Visually Impaired women is a human rights issue, and till now it remains an unarticulated subject, a taboo word, both in the disabled community and feminist activists. So, we should need to take necessary steps to disclose these issues urgently to safe and protect the visually impaired adolescent girls from sexually abused. In this study it is focused that what are the existing situation or ways of sexual abuse with visually impaired adolescent girls in Bangladesh and what are the consequences of it.

PROBLEM STATEMENT:

It is obviously a burning issue that “sex” is a forbidden word in Bangladesh but the reality is that 50% of disabled children of Bangladesh are the victim of sexual abuse. Among these special needed children 52 % are girls and 48% are boys, aged between seven to eighteen years (BBC News South Asia, 2010). According to the Bangladesh National Census -2011, Bangladesh has nearly 20 million individuals with disability. They all are at a high risk of becoming a victim of this kind of occurrence. So, this study is very time initiated for the betterment of all.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The main objective of this study is to find out the patterns and consequences of sexual abuse against VI girls in Bangladesh. There are also some additional objectives to fulfill the main objective of this study. These objectives are given bellow:

- To explore the existing situation of sexual abuse with visually impaired adolescent girls in Bangladesh
- To find out the patterns of sexual abuse against visually impaired girls in Bangladesh

- To find out the consequences of sexual abuse against visually impaired girls in Bangladesh

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

For this study Lesley Chenoweth's Feminist Critique of disability has the major guideline on sexual abuse committed against VI girls. This model argues that the situation for disabled women is far different from that of able-bodied women. Socialization of disabled woman is a two-way process, like socialization- as a woman and a disabled. In this circumstance, they are victims of double discrimination (Chenoweth, 1993). Similarly, Salma Maqbool (2003) speaks of triple discrimination: being women, poor and disabled. In this scenario, we need to find out, what are those factors. So, the framework of this study is:

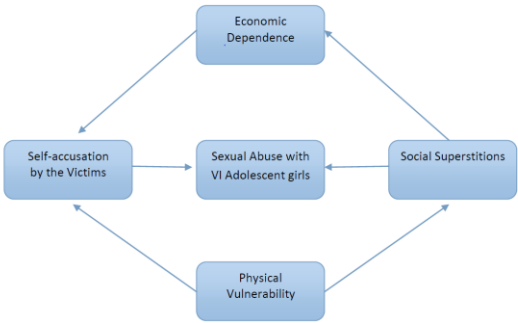


Figure: Conceptual framework (Adapted from Aryal, 2004, p.55)

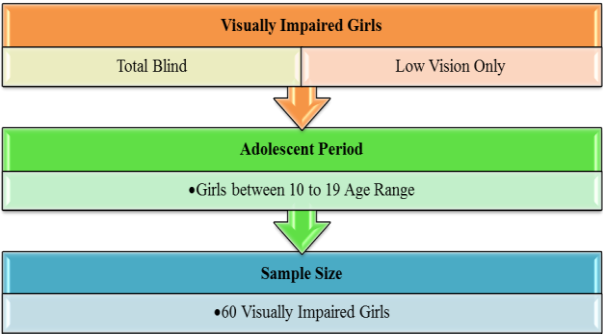
Above, the conceptual framework shows the interrelationship of various causes of sexual abuses. Social superstitions are based on physical vulnerability. The prevalent social attitude of viewing visually challenged as worthless, results in low self-esteem. They are denied opportunities of education and training; thus, they are economically dependent. This economic independence again lowers herself. This accusation is heightened by her physical vulnerability.

METHODOLOGY:

To cover all aspects of sexual abuse against VI adolescent girl students a mixed research method is used. In exploratory sequential

design, qualitative techniques used to explore the present situation, reasons and patterns of sexual abuse upon the victims. In this study mainly, primary data was collected. However, qualitative techniques are used to find out the ways of sexual abuse upon the victims. The study is basically confined across the entire Bangladesh.

To learn and understand the central phenomenon of sexual abuse with visually impaired adolescent girls in Bangladesh, samples were selected purposively. For this study some specific characteristics are mandated. There are –



According to the requirement, in total 60 interviews are collected. For explaining the situation, the researchers have used frequency and percentage only. The participants of this study are visually impaired so the researchers used interview schedule; 4 FGDs and case studies (among those 60 girls) as tools.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

This study tried to explore the reality of sexual abuse against visually impaired adolescent girls across the entire Bangladesh. It gives information about the scenario of sexual abuse against VI girls. For better understanding all data are presented and discussed thematically-

Criteria of Participants:

Since the research is more concerned with uncovering the prevalence of sexual abuse against visually impaired girls as a whole, the selection of the respondents on the basis of the criterion of visual impairment is not felt to be important.

Table 1: Criteria of Participants

Nature of Respondents	Total number N=60	Total number of victims	Percentage of victims
Total blind	22	18	33%
Low vision	38	30	63%
Total	60	28	96%

Table 1: shows the criteria of participants. Here, among of the 60 respondents, 22 are totally blind and 38 are with low vision. Among all victims, 18 victims are totally blind which are 33% of the total number of victims and only 30 victims are with low vision, that is 63% of the total victims. Despite these variable responses, there is an immerging pattern that total blind girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse than low vision girls. This can be because total blind girls are more dependent on people for their rearing, mobility and participation in different activities.

However, low vision girls are fairly independent if they get proper mobility training, they do not have to depend on sighted people for their daily activities. While analyzing the fact, the researcher can come to the termination that total blind girls are highly taken advantage of their blindness by the perpetrators. This observation is also expressed with the highest reason given by the visually impaired victims that they are sexually abused due to their blindness. The disability of total blind girls is more obvious than the low vision girls.

FGD₁-Results also shows the same opinion, P₂FGD₁ said like-

“I have low vision and I don’t use white cane. My eyes are not deformed and they cannot be differentiated from sighted girls. But total blind girls are easily symptomatic and thus they are more targeted for sexual abuse by unknown people. However, simultaneously we both are equally defenseless to the abuse by the known perpetrator.”

So, the direct effects of disability are the effects that are forced upon a disabled person because of their disability. This can be the dependency on a caregiver; the inability to escape or avoid the offender and the inability to seek help, but also the type of disability (Petersilia, 2001).

In this study an important word is society. From the society, social taboos are created. It is also found by the researcher that social taboos make visually impaired girls more vulnerable. Besides this in the medical model, people defined by their medical condition or illness. Someone with a disability has a fault that needs to be fixed; persons need to become as close to normal as possible. The social model seems disability as imposed by society because of society's conception of what is normal and because of environmental barriers (Rothman, 2010; Anthony, 2011). In addition, the past and even still today people in Ghana use a religious or magical worldview to understand disability (Avoke, 2002). In the religious or magical worldview, disability is seen as a punishment from the gods. These types of taboos still exist in Bangladesh too.

Situation of Sexual Abuse against Visually Impaired Girls:

Total 56 out of the 60 interviewed respondents said that they are well-known with the word “sexual abuse”. That means only 4 interviewed respondents are not familiar with the word “sexual abuse”. Respondents whose know about sexual abuse, they said that they become accompany with the word by radio, TV, text book, family gossips and obviously from friends.

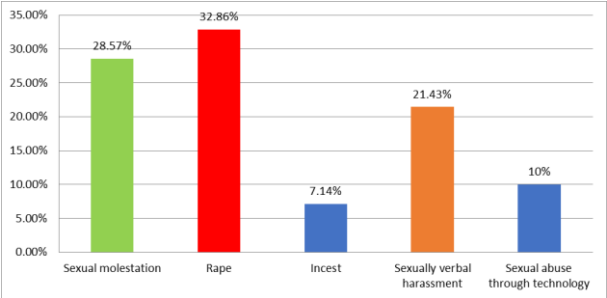


Figure 1: Patterns of sexual abuse against visually impaired girls

Figure 1: shows the ways of Sexual Abuse against visually impaired girls. Here large number of interviewees, approximately 33% of respondents expressed their bad impression of facing rape cases, around 29% said about sexual molestation and the third large number of the respondents told us about verbal harassment (22%). Approximately 10% and 7% of respondents said about technological abuse and incest rape.

From case study tools it is also revealed that;
“When Eid festival comes, the school hostel was vacant She use to go home, particularly one boy among her relatives, who studied 2 classes above her, seemed to care for her. She was happy but little did she know of his true intention. She was just 13 years old and didn’t know anything about sex. That so-called brother raped her for more than 4 times.”

Economic condition as a factor:

In this study the researchers found that among the responses who are abused are economically from different classes. Incidents with them also differ conferring to their social status.

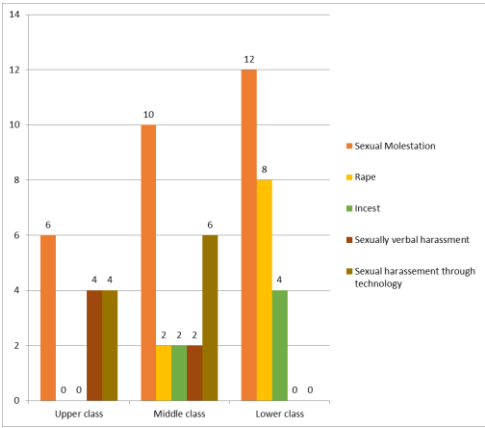


Figure 2: Relation between sexual abuse and economic condition

From this above *Figure 2*: it is found that maximum incidents of sexual abuse happen in lower class level. In upper level only 14 incidents happened but in middle-class level the number of incidents are-22, and it is devastatingly increased in the lower level in 24 incidents. Not only that, but it is also important to notice that 8 rapes among 10 in total happened in lowered level. So here, the researchers found a cruel reality which can describe like over the years it has become apparent that there is a strong link between disability, poverty and abuse (Petersilia, 2001).

While using case study tools a victim expressed her emotions like-

“I am sexually abused!!! I can remember the time when I was sexually abused by my own uncle. When I used to protect it and said it to my

elder sister she did not believe that cause I am not physically attractive or beautiful.
—So it's a matter of fun to my sister and a life time trauma for me."

Education as a factor:

Education is not only a means of knowledge but also a step towards self-dependence. It is one of the most effective means of empowerment of girls. In the case of disabled girls, it is often the only means with which she could gain confidence and dignity to lead a normal life in society. In this situation where the literacy level of girls is lower, the education of visually impaired girls is a distant dream. But now a day there are some schools where visually impaired girls can get their education.

Table 2: Relation between Educational Status and Sexual Abuse

Number of students	Sexually abused	Sexually not abused	Percentage of Sexual abuse
Before schooling	40	8	83%
After schooling	18	30	38%

N=60, Total abused=48

Table 2 shows that before schooling in total 40 girls are sexually abused but after schooling only about 18 girls are sexually abused. So, the percentage of before schooling is too much higher (83%) than after schooling (38%). Though in this study the researchers only used visually impaired adolescent girl students so the table expressed the before and after sexual abuse situation of school-going visually impaired girls. Despite the small number of samples, the study reveals that illiteracy is a major cause of sexual abuse against visually impaired girls.

In this study it is found that there is a strong anti- relation between education and sexual abuse. Similarly, in a study done by Saathi³ (1997) found that 56% of the rape victims were illiterate. The study concludes that education empowers a person, she becomes less susceptible to sexual violence, but it might also be the fact that educated victims decline to be identified due to fear of loss of social prestige (Deuba and Rana, 2001, p. 29). Besides this Arial (2004) said

³ An Organization in Nepal.

that school is the most vulnerable place for visually impaired girls, it is totally opposite of this study.

FGD₂-Results also unfold some bitter truth, P₄FGD₂ uttered like-

“I think we aren’t even safe at our home. Sometimes our family members also behave like hyenas!!!”

In this study, from table: 2, the researchers found that home is the most vulnerable place for visually impaired girls. So, care may start from home.

Identity of the perpetrator:

They are more dependent upon family members, friends, and neighbors for their daily activities. Thus, it is easier for the perpetrator to take advantage of this dependency.

Table: 3: Types of Perpetrator in Comparison with Type of Sexual Violence

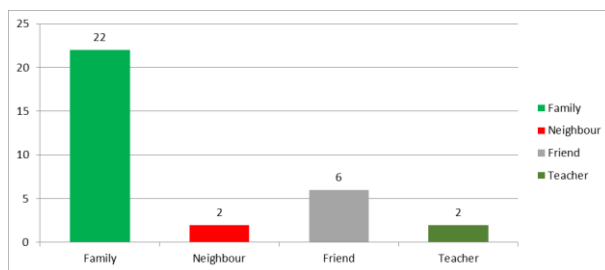
Types of perpetrators	Total Blind N=18	Percentage	Low Vision N=30	Percentage
Known	16	89%	16	53%
Unknown	2	11%	14	47%

Table: 3 shows, if the crimes committed by offenders are compared it can assume that more serious crimes are committed by known perpetrators than unknown ones. The table given above, speaks for itself. The results show that 89% of the perpetrators are known about total blind section but in low vision section it is only 53%. It further clarifies that the known perpetrator think that it is easier to choose total blind girls than low vision girls. This is also supported by UNICEF Bangladesh, 2014 report.

It is strongly uttered by a participant (P₆FGD₃) of FGD₃ like-
“In the case of visually impaired girls, we are most vulnerable to abuse by known perpetrators than unknown ones.”

Relation between Victims and Perpetrators:

Among the 32 known perpetrators the known perpetrators are also from different backgrounds. Such as -



N=32

Figure 3: Relation between victims to their perpetrators

This Figure 3: shows that own home and society are the most vulnerable place for the visually impaired girls. Among 32 sexual offences committed against visually impaired girls, 24 are committed at home by family members and neighbours. Among them, 10 are cousins, 2 is own fathers whereas other 12 are their neighbour. 6 incidents happened by friends.

Sometimes it is easier for rich offenders to abuse visually impaired girls as no one would believe them to be capable of such offence due to their high social status also said by an interviewee. So, most of the visually impaired girls are not safe in their own home. From this study these findings are strongly supported by Sobsey & Mansell, (1994). They said disabilities make women and girls more vulnerable to abuse because they often need help from different caretakers. For caregivers, who make up a large part of all offenders, there are two types of offenders, the predatory caregiver and the corrupted caregiver (Sobsey & Calder, 1999). The predatory caregivers usually have feelings of inadequacy, a lack of control and the need to have control over vulnerable people (Crossmaker, 1991). They seek the proximity of disabled people and they often plan their offences which is also support by this study.

It is uttered by Armstrong, Rosenbaum, & King, (1992) that lower self-confidence and fewer friendships also heighten the vulnerability of VI girls.

Consequences as major findings:

- Though almost all the visually impaired girls know about 'sexual abuse', after that due to lack of their eyesight, visually impaired girls, cannot read facial expressions and understand the body language of the perpetrator. So, they cannot be

forewarned about the perpetrator's ill interest in her. Thus, she understands it at the last moment, and then it is too late to prevent violence.

- It is alarming that from this study it has emerged that total blind girls faced more rape incidents than that of low vision girls. It is also a matter of sorrow that perpetrators from their kith and kin and neighbourhood targeted total blind girls as they are unable to identify them.
- Another cruel reality is that visually impaired girls from lower-class and middle-class society become much more victims than upper-class society.
- Again, in this study it is proved that education is a power which can remove any kind of discrimination and terrible happens. In this study it is flourished that before schooling (83.33%) girls were much more victimized than after (37.5%) schooling.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

In our culture, girls have been always taught to be polite, submissive and silent. Boys are always encouraged to be heroic and powerful. This different process of socialization produces different sets of ruling style, which later make men into "oppressor" and women into "oppressed". So for Bangladesh patriarchy is the inherent cause of sexual violence against women. With this Chenoweth (1993) expressed that, it is believed that women with disabilities should be grateful for any sexual advances made to them because they are so unattractive. Besides this, in Bangladesh virginity and celibacy of women is highly valued. It also believes that a girl should be in protection of father; after she marries; she should be in the control of her husband; if she becomes a widow; even then she should remain in control of her son. But in reality, it needs much more care and security to secure visually impaired girls' dignity. So, it is high time to break down all these social taboos.

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