

## ABSTRACT

### Introduction

Abuse during childhood is a human tragedy leading to lifelong adverse health, social, and economic consequences for survivors.

### Objectives

To validate a tool to assess abusive experiences during childhood and to determine the prevalence and factors associated with physical, sexual and emotional abusive experiences during childhood and help sought following abuse, among young adults aged 18 - 20 years schooling in the Gampaha District

### Methods

A descriptive study was conducted among 1500 young adults selected by a multistage cluster sampling method from Gampaha District. The prevalence of experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and help seeking behaviour was ascertained using ICAST-R (ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool-Retrospective Version) which was culturally adapted and validated among 200 students from Kalutara District. An analytical cross-sectional study was conducted among the study units identified as 'abused' and 'never-abused' to determine the factors associated with being physically, sexually and emotionally abused during childhood. The prevalence of each type of abusive experience was determined by percentages with 95% confidence intervals. The factors associated with abusive experiences were determined by calculating odds ratios (OR) along with 95% confidence intervals and p values at 0.05 level.

### Results

The adapted instruments were confirmed as valid with the results of exploratory factor analysis using PCA showing that the factor structure of original ICAST-R has been reproduced fairly well and the reliability was also confirmed with Cohen's kappa being >0.76.

Prevalence of physical abusive experiences during childhood was 45.4% (95%CI 42.9–47.9) with 0.1% (n=2) being severe. Prevalence of experiences of sexual abuse during childhood was 9.1% (95% CI7.6-10.5; females 11.5% , males 6.4%). Severe abusive experiences were experienced by 0.2%. (n=3).Prevalence of emotional abusive experiences during childhood was 27.9% (95%CI25.7–30.2) with 2.4% (n=3)

being severe. Among the respondents who had at least a single experience of any type of abuse, 30-44% had sought for help through their friends or mothers.

Among the individual level factors that were associated with abusive experiences, being a male increased the odds of experiences of physical (OR=3.39, 95%CI=2.55-4.53) and emotional (OR=1.97, 95%CI=1.49-2.60) abuse while the odds of experiences of sexual abuse (OR=0.55, 95%CI =0.33-0.89) was reduced among males. Apart from being a non-Buddhist which increased the odds of experiences of emotional (OR=1.55, 95%CI= 1.21-3.64) and sexual (OR=2.11, 95% CI= 0.9-2.11)) abuse none of the other socio-demographic characteristics showed significant associations with experiences of abuse. Of the educational characteristics assessed only spending less than 7 hours per day on academic work increased the odds of experiences of physical (OR=1.59, 95%CI =1.19-2.14)) and emotional (OR=1.62, 95%CI = 1.21-2.18) abuse. Presence of a long term illness in the study subject increased the odds of experiences of all three types of abuse that were investigated (physical abuse: OR=2.00; 95%CI 1.36-2.94, sexual abuse: OR=1.95; 95%CI = 1.09-3.49), emotional abuse: OR=2.02, 95%CI = 1.37-2.98). Having one or more mental health problems detected using SDQ consistently increased the odds of experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse during childhood. Practices of smoking and use of alcohol increased the odds of physical (smoking: OR=2.82; 95%CI = 1.51-5.26, use of alcohol: OR=2.75; 95%CI = 1.78-4.24) and emotional (smoking; OR=2.06; 95%CI (1.05-4.02), use of alcohol; OR=2.19; 95%CI = 1.39-3.45) abusive experiences but no association was observed with sexual abuse experiences. Father's frequent use of alcohol consistently increased the odds of all three types of abusive experiences (physical abuse: OR=1.60; 95%CI = 1.04-2.49, sexual abuse: OR=2.42; 95%CI = 1.34-4.39, emotional abuse: OR=1.92; 95%CI = 1.26-2.99).

Among the relationship and family level factors assessed, issues related to attachment with father and mother consistently increased the odds of experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse during childhood, while the relationship of the attachment with peers and abusive experiences were not very consistent. Indicators of violence within the family showed significant associations with experiences all three types of abuse factors related to family structure and living standards did not. None of the variables that were used to reflect the community/ societal level factors showed significant associations with any types of abuse assessed.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Prevalence of physical, sexual and emotional abusive experiences during childhood were high among young adults aged 18-20 years schooling in the Gampaha District. Findings are recommended to be used to advocate for targeted interventions. Low proportions had sought help for abusive experiences.

Modifiable factors such as poor attachment with parents, alcohol use of fathers, violence within the family should be addressed in a programme of primary prevention. Children with long term physical illnesses, mental health problems etc should be identified as children at risk of abuse and targeted interventions should be delivered to prevent abuse. Available services for child victims of abuse and the pathways that are open to seek help from formal service providers should be promoted.

**Key words:** Physical abuse, Sexual abuse, Emotional abuse, Factors, Child abuse, Help seeking behavior