

ABSTRACT

The issue of child abuse which has not been adequately highlighted in the past is now coming into the open with the increase in research and awareness. However it may still only be revealing the tip of the iceberg. Increasing socio-cultural changes occurring in society, may negatively affect the families, and thus increase the likelihood of child abuse.

Physical abuse and neglect are the main categories of child abuse, but the information available about these in Sri Lanka is limited. Considering available information from other developing countries, one cannot underestimate the potential seriousness of the problem.

Foreign employment of mothers is currently a popular theme for discussion and debate, because these mothers contribute to the national economy. However child abuse is reported to be more prevalent among single parent families. Therefore this study was to investigate physical abuse and neglect of 13-15 year old children of migrant mothers in rural areas of the Kandy district.

Literature search did not reveal any culturally appropriate instruments to identify physical abuse and neglect. Thus it was an essential pre-requisite to develop, validate, and pretest a new instrument to measure physical abuse and neglect. A cross sectional study compared randomly selected 850 children (index group) between the ages of 13-15 years whose mothers were employed abroad with similar group of children who were living with their mothers (comparison group). The two groups were from the same neighbourhood and were matched for gender, age and socio-economic factors. The data were analyzed using the chi square and other non parametric tests.

In the index group the grandmother is now the primary caregiver. As reported by the children in the index group the care provided by the main caregiver was inferior to the quality of care given by the mother in the following domains; help with school work, care during illness and protection. The prevalence of severity of the outcome following physical abuse was higher among children in the index group. But mild forms of physical abuse like smacking (hitting by hand) are higher among children in the comparison group.

Neglect in the physical, educational and emotional domains was higher among the children of the index group. All the children who dropped out from the school (n=25) were from the index group.

The types and frequency of physical abuse (corporal punishment) in the schools were higher among the children from the index group. Poor school performances and behavioural problems in the schools were significantly higher in the index group.

Mothers' employment abroad as a solution for economic hardship has serious consequences to the children left behind. According to the previous studies even the expected financial gains were not met with satisfaction of the families. This study shows the adverse consequences on the children's behaviour as well as on school performances. It is known that adults with history of abuse in childhood, may in turn abuse children later. Therefore abuse and neglect of children of the next generation may happen as proven in other studies.

If the cost implications of physical abuse and neglect can be estimated, it can be compared with the economical gain from the employment. It appears that the negative impact outweigh the financial benefits. Therefore cost effectiveness of maternal migration for employment needs to be assessed in a future study.