

A CASE STUDY ON GRAVE SEXUAL ABUSE VICTIMIZATION OF STREET GIRLS IN SRI LANKA: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO COLOMBO SUBURBS

B. V. N. Wijewardana¹ and D. W. M. P. W. Dewanarayana²

^{1,2}Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Sri Jayewardenepura

neranji@sjp.ac.lk

Abstract

Street children reside in unstable and disadvantaged surroundings. Street girls often lack proper shelter. This qualitative case studies aimed to examine the prevalence of grave sexual abuse among street girls, and subsequently conduct case studies on the identified victims. This was theoretically guided by Chicago School Theory, Deviant Place Theory, and Feminist Theory. The primary data collection involved direct observation and informal discussions with street girls in Colombo suburbs. The sample selection utilized random sampling and snowball sampling techniques. A sample of 25 street girls in the age group between 11- 19 were interviewed face-to-face using a questionnaire. Among them, 4 reported experiencing grave sexual abuse providing primary data. Secondary data sources included existing literature, research studies, official reports, documents from government agencies, NGOs, and media sources. The findings highlighted how broken families and fatherless households drive girls to street life, increasing vulnerability to grave sexual abuse. Limited education, unstable housing, and lack of a safe environment further exposed them to abuse. There is a lack of parental communication regarding sexual abuse and it can occur in diverse settings affecting girls of various ages, by perpetrators from various age groups, genders, backgrounds and could be victim-related or strangers. The prevalent form of grave sexual abuse was rape. The victims suffer from physical health decline, trauma, psychological distress, and symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Their ability to seek help is hindered by fear, shame, and distrust. Victim survivors face challenges and it has a negative impact on them.

Keywords: Colombo suburbs, Grave sexual abuse, Sri Lankan street children, Street girl, Victimization

Introduction

Street children have become a permanent feature of the most urban landscapes in many developing nations. They are hard to miss, since the realities of existence fall within the realms of our daily consciousness, either by reading about in the newspaper or seeing them in some of the most uncomplimentary manner on the televisions or the internet. Yet the plights of these children

continue to deteriorate in many developing countries, where resources are woefully inadequate to as deal with the situation. Many published accounts of street children see them in aggregate terms, thus readers are not able to develop a more personal and a heightened sense of empathy for these children. Thus, paper provides an individualized account of a street girls in Colombo suburbs, from birth to the day

she enters the streets. In a form of a narrative, the street girl opens up the life that in most cases are shielded from field researchers. I opened up about grave sexual abuses street girls face, and the mechanism they employed to protect themselves. Data was collected through interviews by a prepared questionnaire and field observations. I captured the incredible story of the girls through their own words. The study was guided by Chicago School Theory, Deviant Place Theory and Feminist Theory to understand the prevailing situations among these girls. 25 street girls between the ages 11–19 is selected from observation. This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the grave sexual abuse faced by street girls. Hopefully such direct contacts between street children and reader would ignite a stronger advocacy on behalf of these children.

Conceptual Framework

In this research, the following key concepts are foundational to understanding the complexities of abuse faced by street children, particularly focusing on girls:

- Child: A human being under 19 years of age, forming the demographic scope of the study.
- Girl Child: Specifically, a female child between 11 to 19 years old, highlighting the focus on adolescent girls.
- Street Children: Individuals below 19 years without a permanent residence, residing on the streets with or without guardians.
- Street Girls: Female children aged 11 to 19 with no permanent residence, residing full-time on the streets either with or without guardians.
- Abuse: Intentional actions or omissions causing distress, especially to a girl child, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, or other forms of harm.
- Grave Sexual Abuse: Acts causing sexual distress, including rape, performed on another person's body or orifice using genitalia, body parts, or instruments.

Theoretical Framework

1. Chicago School Theory:

- Related to the Study: Highlights structural factors in Colombo suburbs contributing to street girls' vulnerability, including poverty and social disorganization.
- Incorporation: Questions in the questionnaire explore social disorganization, poverty, and community resources within specific neighborhoods.

2. Deviant Place Theory:

- Related to the Study: Explains how economically disadvantaged neighborhoods expose street girls to higher risks of sexual abuse.
- Incorporation: Questionnaire probes safety concerns, exposure to high-crime areas, and the absence of capable guardians.

3. Feminist Theory:

- Related to the Study: Highlights unique vulnerabilities of street girls due to intersecting factors of poverty and gender, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive interventions.
- Incorporation: Questionnaire explores gender-specific challenges faced by street girls, informed by feminist principles, including access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities.

Literature Review

Street children pose challenging problems in low and middle-income nations (Uk, Www, Sharmila, Khwairakpam, Kaur & Sukhminder, 2014). They are a consequence of socioeconomic disadvantages, dysfunctional families, and familial influences (Senaratna & Wijewardhana, 2013). Street children often experience verbal and physical abuse from their parents, which contributes to their vulnerable situation (Uk, Www, Sharmila, Khwairakpam, Kaur & Sukhminder, 2014). Street-connected children and youth engaged in transactional sex for survival, with initiation rites often involving

violent sexual acts (Embleton et al, 2015). A cross-sectional qualitative study revealed that most street children in Colombo were males, under 14 years old, and lacked guardians (Senaratna & Wijewardhana, 2012). Minority ethnic groups were overrepresented among street children in Colombo (Senaratna & Wijewardhana 2013). Living on the streets exposes street boys to regular physical abuse, while street females experience victimization and sexual offenses (Lalor, 1999). Child sexual abuse experiences contribute to girls becoming adult street prostitutes, and girls on the street are at high risk of rape (Silbert et al, 1981; Sisay et al, 2002). Young female hawkers being sexually abused is a public health concern that can be addressed through poverty reduction, health education, and protective child rights policies (Ikechebelu, Joseph, Udigwe, Gerald, Ezechukwu, Clement, Ndinechi & Ngozi, 2008). Girls, especially those living on the streets, are particularly vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including grave sexual abuse. (Dunne et al, 2019; Collin-Vézina et al, 2017).

Street children and girls face challenges such as poverty, homelessness, and limited access to education and healthcare, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation (Naker et al, 2019). Alarming rates of sexual abuse among street girls have been found globally, with approximately 19.7% experiencing sexual abuse before the age of 18 and 9.2% experiencing severe forms of sexual abuse (Stoltenborgh et al, 2011; Pereda et al, 2009). There is limited research on the sexual abuse of street girls in Sri Lanka, but studies have shown that 32% of street girls in Sri Lanka report experiencing sexual abuse (Arunaratnam et al, 2018).

The causes of sexual abuse among street girls can be attributed to factors such as lack of parental care and support and societal marginalization and stigmatization (Kimerling et al, 2007). Sexual

abuse of street girls has physical health consequences such as sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies, as well as psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety, self-harm, and substance abuse disorders (Buscher et al, 2019).

Efforts to address the sexual abuse of street girls require a comprehensive approach involving protective policies, legal frameworks, education initiatives, and awareness raising (Kaiser, Elma, Sinanan & Allison, 2019; Senaratna & Wijewardhana, 2012; Kimerling et al, 2007). The consequences of sexual abuse on street girls include physical and psychological trauma, disrupted education, increased risk of substance abuse, and limited access to healthcare (Silva, Jayasundara, & Handapangoda, 2021).

Research Gap

There is extensive research conducted globally on child abuse, victimization of street women, and street children has limited focus on Sri Lanka, especially street girls. However, there is a notable research gap in understanding the grave sexual abuse victimization of street girls in Sri Lanka, necessitating an in-depth investigation.

This study focused on street girls' perspectives, experiences, challenges, and impacts related to grave sexual abuse, aiming to fill this critical research gap. It aimed to contribute to existing knowledge and awareness, providing insights for evidence-based interventions and policies.

The findings will enhance academic literature and offer practical implications for policymakers, organizations, and child protection advocates. Conclusively, it seeks to inform evidence-based interventions, policies, and programs, promoting a safer environment and protecting the rights and well-being of street girls in Sri Lanka.

Research Methodology

Study Area

The study area includes Colombo district of Sri Lanka; Colombo Central, Colombo North, Colombo West, Colombo South, Colombo East, Homagama, Kaduwela, Kesbewa, Kolonnawa, Maharagama, Moratuwa, Ratmalana, and Thimbirigasyaya.

Sample

- Initial sample: 25 street girls in Colombo suburbs interviewed with a structured questionnaire.
- Qualitative study: Four street girls with grave sexual abuse experiences were selected.
- Participants under 15 years: Parent/guardian interviews conducted along with the girl child.

Data Analysis Approach

- Qualitative Research Approach and Narrative analysis

Primary Data Collection:

- Identified 25 street girls through direct observation.
- Utilized random and snowball sampling methods
- Conducted face-to face interviews using a structured questionnaire.
- In-depth case studies of four street girls with grave sexual abuse experiences which provided primary data for the study's analysis and findings.

Secondary Data Sources:

- Reviewed existing literature, research studies, and scholarly articles on sexual abuse and street children globally.
- Analyzed media sources including newspapers, online articles, and documentaries for real-life stories and case

studies related to street girls' sexual abuse victimization.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Demographic Information

Case Study One

- Participant: 12-year-old Muslim girl living with her mother and three younger siblings (8-year-old girl, 7-year-old boy, and 2-year-old girl).
- Family Background: Raised by her single mother; unaware of her father's identity. Family has been on the streets for 12 years due to mother being abandoned by her family for being pregnant out of wedlock.
- Education: Not attending school, no formal education.
- Occupation: Not engaged in any form of occupation.

Case Study Two

- Participant: 15-year-old Sinhala girl living with her biological mother and 9-year-old brother.
- Family Background: Conflict and strained relationships at home led them to live on the streets for the past 5 years.
- Education: Studied up to grade 7, currently not attending school.
- Occupation: Not engaged in any form of occupation.

Case Study Three

- Participant: 16-year-old Sinhala girl living with her aunt, aunt's daughter (10 years old), and son (9 years old).
- Family Situation: Biological parents live in Embilipitiya with two younger sisters (10 and 8 years old). They've been on the streets for 10 years due to family's financial struggles.
- Education: Studied up to grade 6, currently not attending school.

- Occupation: Not engaged in any form of occupation.

Case Study Four

- Participant: 18-year-old Sinhala girl residing with her 22-year-old sister.
- Family Background: Knows her biological mother; father left during mother's

pregnancy. Mother lives with aunt due to economic crisis.

- Education: Never attended formal school; basic literacy limited to writing her name.
- Occupation: Sells incense sticks for livelihood.

Responses on Opinion Statements on Grave Sexual Abuse

Table 1: Responses on Opinion Statements on Grave Sexual Abuse

Statement	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
1. Some children are sexually abused by older children	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
2. Most people who sexually abuse children do not belong to the child's family	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree
3. Most of the time children are sexually abused when they are alone	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	Agree
4. Few street children are victims of grave sexual abuse	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree
5. Only young children are victims of grave sexual abuse	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree
6. Boys are not sexually abused	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree
7. A majority of sexual abuse perpetrators are retarded or mentally ill	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree	Disagree
8. Even if one lets a year go by without talking about a grave sexual abuse situation, it is still possible to do something about it	Disagree	Agree	Agree	Agree
9. In sexual abuse cases, the child herself is never responsible	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree

Based on the participants' responses, it can be concluded that the street girl participants possess an understanding of the severity and existence of grave sexual abuse. Their emotions of anger, sadness, frustration, scepticism, and sadness demonstrate their recognition that sexual abuse can have significant and long-lasting impacts on victims. They challenge the notion that only young children are victims, emphasizing their belief that individuals of various ages can experience severe abuse. This indicates a nuanced understanding of the diverse nature of

grave sexual abuse. Their disagreement with the statement that few street children are victims of grave sexual abuse suggests their perception that the prevalence of such abuse is higher than commonly acknowledged. Overall, the participants' responses reflect an awareness and understanding of the seriousness of grave sexual abuse, indicating their recognition of the need for increased awareness, support, and protection for victims while also reflecting differing opinions on specific aspects of the issue.

Knowledge about Grave Sexual Abuse before Incident/s and Resource/s

Table 2: Knowledge about Grave Sexual Abuse before Incident/s and Resource/s

Question	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
10. Have your parents ever talked with you about child/grave sexual abuse?	No	No	No	No
10.1. If they have, which parent/s?	No	No	No	No
11. By whom have they explained such acts may be committed?	-	-	-	-
12. What was their advice to you if it happened to you?	-	-	-	-
13. Were you told about sexual abuse somewhere else? If so, please specify who told you about it (e.g., friend, scout, doctor, etc.)	No	No	Street friends	No
14. Can you briefly explain what child and/or sexual abuse means according to your understanding?	“The trouble done by a man to a girl.”	“The inflicting of forceful sexual intercourse on female genitals by males and threatening to keep it a secret.”	“Grave Sexual Abuse means something really bad and terrible. It's when someone older, usually a grown-up, does things to a child that they shouldn't do. It could be touching us in private places or making us do things we don't want to do. It's a violation, a feeling of being trapped and powerless. It's scary and makes us feel dirty and ashamed. We know it's wrong, but we often don't know what to do or who to turn to for help. It's a secret that we carry inside, but it hurts us deeply and affects us for a long time.”	“Child abuse, as I understand it, is when adults or older individuals harm or mistreat children. It can be physical or sexual, and it's something that can cause a lot of pain and suffering. Sexual abuse specifically involves inappropriate sexual actions towards children, and it's a violation of their trust and innocence.”

The research findings indicate a significant lack of awareness and communication regarding grave sexual abuse among the participants. Most respondents reported they had no prior knowledge of abuse before victimization, and all affirmed that their parents had never discussed the topic with them. This communication gap within families raises concerns about the girls' preparedness and ability to protect themselves from potential sexual abuse. It points to a noteworthy deficiency in parental awareness and a lack of proactive efforts to address this crucial topic within the family setting.

The absence of information about who provided explanations or what guidance was given in cases of grave sexual abuse suggests that most girls did not receive counsel from trusted sources, particularly their parents. The sole mention of learning about sexual abuse from street friends underscores the significance of informal networks and peer interactions as potential sources of information for these girls. However, the reliance on friends for information poses

potential issues related to accuracy and reliability.

Responses to the inquiry about defining child and sexual abuse varied in depth and accuracy. The first participant exhibited a limited understanding, recognizing harmful actions but lacking comprehensiveness. In contrast, the second participant demonstrated a more explicit and accurate awareness, likely derived from personal experiences. The third participant exhibited a comprehensive and empathetic understanding, acknowledging the profound impact of abuse on children, encompassing personal boundaries, powerlessness, fear, shame, and enduring effects. The fourth participant's comprehension encompassed both physical and sexual mistreatment, recognizing the pain, suffering, and breach of trust involved. Overall, these responses underscore the critical need for improved communication within families and emphasize the influential role of informal networks in shaping participants' understanding of sexual abuse.

Personal Experiences of Grave Sexual Abuse and Perpetrator/s

Table 3: Personal Experiences of Grave Sexual Abuse and Perpetrator/s

Question	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
15. Various forms of grave sexual abuse she has faced	Forceful fondling Rape	Non-consensual exposure to genitals Forced to undress and show her own genitals Rape	Touching her inappropriately(body) Made her perform sexual favours Sexual assault. Rape	Forceful fondling with older children Forced to watch explicit pornographic material Rape
15.1. Number of times faced?	Multiple times	4 times	Multiple times	Multiple times
15.2. Are you still currently subjected to any of these situations?	No	No	Yes	No
15.3. How old were you when it happened the first time?	9 years	13 years	14 years	13 years

15.4. If not, how old were you the last time it happened to you?	11 years	15 years	-	17 years
16. Can you identify the perpetrator or perpetrators?	Yes. Mother's former partner	Yes. Mother's former partner	No. Strangers	No. Strangers, teenagers, men she has seen on the streets or the area
16.1. What is the perpetrator's /s' gender/s and age/s,	Male 39 years	Male About 45 years	Males Ranging from 30-50	Males and Females Ranging from teenagers to adults
17. Whether informed responsible person/s while facing it or soon afterwards? If not, why?	Has not informed mother until he was remanded. due to fear of threatening and abandonment from family. No other trusted person to tell. Had no idea on how to explain the incidents.	Has not informed mother due to fear of threatening and abandonment from family, Did not understand what happened and how to explain it. Felt scared and ashamed so has denied to seek help.	Has not informed due to lack of trust in authorities and institutions Victim-blaming and disbelief when reporting incidents of sexual abuse	Has not informed due to fear of potential consequences if informed. Lack of support from a responsible individual Lack of awareness, Fear of retaliation Lack of trustworthiness in authority figures.
17.1. If yes, what happened?	-	-	-	-

In questions based on personal experiences on grave sexual abuse, responses indicate that all four participants have experienced severe and traumatic forms of sexual abuse and that everyone has specifically been victims of rape.

Participant 1 reports experiencing multiple instances of grave sexual abuse. Participant 2 mentions facing abuse four times. Participant 3 and Participant 4's responses aligns with Participant 1. Comparing the responses, it is evident that all four participants have endured repeated incidents of grave sexual abuse. The similarities in the types of abuse indicates a

pattern of predatory behavior. The presence of recurring abuse underscores the long-lasting and ongoing trauma experienced by these girls.

Regarding the current situations, Participant 1, Participant 2 and Participant 4 state that they are no longer subjected to these abusive situations. However, Participant 3 mentions that she is currently being victimized by abuse. The varying circumstances reflect the different stages of their experiences. Furthermore, the participants' ages at the first occurrence of abuse vary. This suggests that the abuse started at different stages of their lives, but all participants experienced it

during their early adolescence. The ages at which the participants last experienced instances of sexual abuse signifies the culmination or cessation of their victimization to some extent. These observations highlight the varied durations

of abuse experienced by the street girls. However, any duration of sexual abuse, regardless of its length, can have severe and lasting impacts on the victims' well-being and development.

Physical and Mental Conditions Before and After Victimization

Table 4: Physical and Mental Conditions Before and After Victimization

Participant	Physical condition before victimization	Mental condition before victimization	Physical condition after victimization	Mental condition after victimization
Participant 1	Innocence, resilience, and survival instincts	Naivety with a street-smart mindset to navigate realities of the environment	Weight loss, self-neglect, and physical trauma from abuse	Defensive and guarded body language with withdrawal from physical contact and signs of discomfort Trust issues, difficulty forming healthy relationships, and maintaining a sense of safety Decreased self-esteem and symptoms of anxiety and depression Flashbacks and heightened hypervigilance
Participant 2	Fragile, malnourished, and physically neglected	Pretends to have a tough exterior, constantly on guard and distant	Worsened physical state with visible signs of vulnerability	Withdrew into herself, seeks solace and safety by being alone from her family Feels deep anguish and sorrow Constant feelings of fear, confusion, and intrusive thoughts Sense of worthlessness and despair
Participant 3	Resilient yet vulnerable physical state Malnutrition, lack of hygiene, exposed to harsh weather conditions	Holds onto hope, finds moments of joy and connection with fellow street people Certain level of resilience and determination to persevere	Direct impact of abuse: physical pain, sexually transmitted infections, injuries in genitals and other body parts,	Intense emotional distress: shame, guilt, worthlessness Weakened trust in others, constant state of fear Nightmares and flashbacks, impacting sleep and mental stability Decreased self-esteem, symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder Changed perception of the world, withdrawal from social interactions, loss of hope for a better future

Participant 4	Delicate balance between vulnerability and resilience Struggles with finding enough food, lack of access to basic hygiene facilities Physically weakened and more prone to exhaustion due to extreme weather conditions	Moments of solace and connection within the street community Glimmers of hope, dreams of a better future, and belief in improvement Determination to survive and navigate street life	Visible scars from abrasions Physical pain and discomfort from injuries Exacerbated vulnerabilities and difficulty in physical recovery	Overwhelmed by fear and constant unease Shattered trust in others, suspicion, and wariness Deep sense of shame and guilt Disrupted perception of the world Magnified challenges as a street girl, increased vulnerability Dire need for comprehensive support, specialized care, and trauma-focused interventions Long and arduous journey of recovery, yearning for a safe space to heal
---------------	---	---	---	---

In respect of physical and mental status before and after grave sexual abuse victimization, all participants experienced a decline in their physical condition following the abuse. They suffered from weight loss, self-neglect, and visible signs of physical trauma. This suggests that the abuse took a toll on their physical well-being, resulting in deterioration and vulnerability. Additionally, all participants faced intense emotional distress as a consequence of the abuse. They experienced feelings of shame, guilt, fear, and worthlessness, indicating the profound psychological impact of the traumatic event. Furthermore, symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder

were evident in the mental responses of all participants, reflecting the lasting effects of the abuse on their mental health. Lastly, each participant exhibited coping mechanisms such as defensive body language, withdrawal from physical contact, and a sense of wariness towards others. Despite these similarities, there are notable differences. The participants’ physical conditions before the abuse varied. These differences suggest varying levels of vulnerability. Mentally too the participants exhibited differences. These differences highlight the individual responses to the trauma and the unique ways in which each participant’s mental well-being was affected.

Challenges faced after Grave Sexual Abuse

Table 5: Challenges faced after Grave Sexual Abuse

Participant	Challenges	Participant	Challenges
Participant 1	Emotional trauma Flashbacks and intrusive memories Isolation Difficulty in daily functioning Long-lasting effects	Participant 3	Physical Health Complications Self-Esteem and Identity Challenges Social Isolation and Stigma
Participant 2	Trust issues Difficulty in forming connections Persistent traumatic memories Flashbacks Emotional distress	Participant 4	Safety and Security Concerns Substance Abuse and Addiction Physical Health Challenges Psychological and Emotional Consequences

With respect of challenges faced after experiencing grave sexual abuse, all participants who have experienced grave sexual abuse share several common challenges. Participants in this study share common struggles resulting from intense emotional trauma caused by abuse, experiencing fear, shame, guilt, and confusion that impede daily life. Their ability to trust is damaged, leading to difficulties in forming healthy relationships and seeking support. Distressing flashbacks and intrusive memories further contribute to their torment, perpetuating a cycle of suffering. Social isolation, fueled by the stigma surrounding abuse, hampers their ability to openly discuss experiences or seek help. Despite these shared challenges, individual differences emerge in the severity and nature of emotional struggles, trust issues, and physical health complications based on unique abuse experiences. Each case underscores the need for tailored support, emphasizing the distinct aspects of participants' journeys. The study highlights how disorganized and harmful environments exacerbate post-abuse challenges, hindering recovery and societal reintegration. The overarching theme underscores the profound impact of environment on coping mechanisms and support-seeking behaviors.

Conclusion

The research focused on the prevalence of grave sexual abuse victimization among street girls in Colombo Suburbs, examining a sample of 25 interviewed individuals. Among these, 16% (4 girls, predominantly Sinhala-3 and Muslim-1) reported experiencing grave sexual abuse, prompting a detailed case study to gain deeper insights into their traumatic experiences.

A significant contributor to girls entering street life is broken families and fatherless households. Financial strain within such families restricts access to essential resources like education, healthcare, and suitable housing, compelling

girls to turn to street life. The absence of positive male role models leaves them vulnerable, lacking protection, guidance, and affirmation, leading to their susceptibility to abusive situations on the streets.

Street girls encounter considerable hardships due to limited education and the absence of stable housing, constraining their chances for personal and economic growth. Living on the streets exposes them to various forms of grave sexual abuse, with their plight worsening when victimized by their homeless mothers' partners. The absence of a safe and secure space leaves them open to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, creating a challenging environment that makes it difficult for them to break free from the cycle of victimization.

Insights regarding grave sexual abuse highlight that victimization can occur in diverse settings, challenging stereotypes that it only happens to young children or boys. The risk spans public and private spaces, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of sexual abuse for street girl victims. The research finds that abusers come from different backgrounds, and their motivations vary, demonstrating the complexity of the issue.

Parental communication gaps contribute significantly to the lack of awareness among victimized street girls regarding child and grave sexual abuse. The absence of discussions with parents reveals a concerning reality faced by these vulnerable individuals. Learning about sexual abuse through informal networks formed with other street girls suggests that these connections play a crucial role in their knowledge acquisition.

Victimized street girls consistently face grave sexual abuse until the perpetrators exist in common environments. Accounts and testimonies point to the prevalent occurrence of rape among these individuals. The abuse often

commences during early adolescence, with varying ages of onset, culmination, or persistence, reflecting a complex timeline. There is a delayed disclosure and reluctance to report the abuse among victims, stemming from factors like fear, threats, abandonment, lack of trust, and the absence of a trusted confidant.

Perpetrators of grave sexual abuse can be both males and females, known individuals, and strangers to victims, encompassing a wide age range, including both younger and older adults. Street girl victims often suffer physical health decline and substantial psychological distress, manifesting in symptoms like weight loss, trauma, shame, guilt, fear, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Coping mechanisms, such as defensive body language and withdrawal, are commonly observed as survivors attempt to protect themselves and adapt to the trauma they have endured. Challenges faced by street girls who have experienced grave sexual abuse include intense emotional trauma, difficulties in trust and forming relationships, distressing flashbacks, social isolation, and long-lasting consequences. The severity of these challenges varies among survivors based on their backgrounds, experiences of abuse, coping mechanisms, physical health complications, and social circumstances.

In conclusion, the research underscores the urgent need for awareness, support, and intervention to address the pervasive and complex issue of grave sexual abuse among street girls. Breaking the cycle of victimization requires a holistic approach to mitigate the profound challenges faced by these vulnerable individuals.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the findings of this research study. Implementing them can contribute to address the issue at hand

and improve the well-being and protection of street girls.

1. Strengthen support systems for street girls, including safe shelters and rehabilitation centers
2. Implement comprehensive sex education programs
3. Establish community outreach programs
4. Collaborate with local authorities and law enforcement agencies
5. Develop trauma-informed counseling and therapy services
6. Engage and empower street girls through peer support groups and mentorship programs:
7. Raise awareness in the community
8. Establish partnerships with local organizations, NGOs, and government agencies
9. Conduct training programs for professionals
10. Foster collaboration with street girls
11. Provide accessible and confidential reporting mechanisms
12. Promote gender equality and challenge stereotypes
13. Allocate adequate resources and funding
14. Enhanced Surveillance and Monitoring

The implementation of these recommendations is of utmost importance in preventing street girls being victimized and re-victimized by grave sexual abuse in Sri Lanka, particularly in Colombo suburbs. These measures can contribute to creating a safer and more supportive environment for street girls, empowering them to build or rebuild their lives and protect themselves from harm or further harm. By implementing above suggestions, we can address the vulnerabilities faced by street girls and work towards their holistic well-being and protection. Incorporating these recommendations will not only provide immediate support to street girls but also contribute to long-term systemic changes

and the prevention of victimization and re-victimization.

References

- Agnew, R. (2013). *Juvenile Delinquency: Causes and Control*. Oxford University Press.
- Akers, R. L. (2017). *Social learning and social structure: A general theory of crime and deviance*. Transaction Publishers.
- Alidost F., Pakzad R., Dolatian M., Abdi F. (2021). Sexual dysfunction among women of reproductive age: A systematic review and meta-analysis.
- Angaw, K. W. (2021). Policy Responses and Social Solidarity Imperatives to Respond the COVID-19 Pandemic Socioeconomic Crises in Ethiopia. *Clinico Economics and Outcomes Research: CEOR*, 13, 279-287. <https://doi.org/10.2147/CEOR.S300695>
- Ansell, N. (2005). *Children, youth and development*. Routledge.
- Arunaratnam, A., Indrakumar, J., & Sumanasekera, R. D. (2018). Socioeconomic determinants of child sexual abuse: A case-control study in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 27(4), 413-429.
- Awasthi, R., Pandey, M., & Singh, S. (2021). Challenges and vulnerabilities faced by girl child: A comprehensive review. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 46(1), 14-19.
- Banerjee, S. (2001). *Indian pediatrics*. 38. 1163-70. Physical abuse of street and slum children of Kolkata.
- Bannister, J., & Farrington, F. (2017). Assessing the consequences of victimization. In *Handbook on the criminology of victimization* (pp. 11-29). Routledge.
- Belknap, J. (2014). *The invisible woman: Gender, crime, and justice*. Cengage Learning.
- Biggeri, M., Libanora, R., & Menchini, L. (2006). Street children: A comparative perspective. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(6), 677-695.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. University of California Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Buscher, D., Azad, O., & Siswanto, A. (2019). Addressing the sexual exploitation of street children: Promoting holistic and multisectoral responses. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 94, 104043. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104043
- Cohen, L. E., & Felson, M. (1979). Social change and crime rate trends: A routine activity approach. *American Sociological Review*, 44(4), 588-608.
- Collin-Vézina, D., Daigneault, I., & Hébert, M. (2017). Lessons learned from child sexual abuse research: Prevalence, outcomes, and preventive strategies. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 11(1), 46.
- Daly, K., & Chesney-Lind, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Feminist criminology: New perspectives in crime, deviance, and justice*. Oxford University Press.
- De Silva, W. T., Ratnayake, R. M. K. S., & Amarasinghe, H. S. (2019). Child sexual abuse in Sri Lanka: A systematic review. *Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*, 48(4), 341-350.
- D'Ercole, A., & Struening, E. (1990). Victimization among homeless women: Implications for service delivery. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 18(2), 141-152. [https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629\(199004\)18:2<141::AID-JCOP2290180206>3.0.CO;2-O](https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(199004)18:2<141::AID-JCOP2290180206>3.0.CO;2-O)
- Dharmadasa, L. & Kithulwaththa, I. & Priyanath, D. & Gunathilaka, M. & Silva, L. & Kumari, M.K.J.K.. (2021). Study on Victims of Child Abuse: A Study Conducted in Two Teaching Hospitals in Sri Lanka. *Medico-Legal Journal of Sri Lanka*. 9. 1. 10.4038/mlj.v9i2.7443.
- Dias, Rita A., Matos, Marlene, Goncalves, Rosa, Santos, Anita. (2014). Multiple Victimization and Social Exclusion: A Grounded Analysis of the Life Stories of Women. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. 55. 10.1177/0022167814546693.
- Dong, X., Simon, M. A., & Gorbien, M. (2014). Elder abuse and neglect in an urban Chinese population. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 26(2), 107-124.
- Dunne, M. P., Zolotor, A. J., Runyan, D. K., Andrevia-Miller, I., Choo, W. J., Dunne, S. K., &

- Romano, E. (2019). ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool Children's Version (ICAST-C): Instrument development and multi-national pilot testing. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 92, 117-128.
- Dutta, Nilika. (2018). STREET CHILDREN IN INDIA: A STUDY ON THEIR ACCESS TO HEALTH AND EDUCATION. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*. 9. 69. 10.18357/ijcyfs91201818120.
- Embleton, Lonnie & Wachira, Juddy & Kamanda, Allan & Naanyu, Violet & Winston, Susanna & Ayuku, David & Braitstein, Paula. (2015). "Once you join the streets you will have to do it": Sexual practices of street children and youth in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. *Reproductive health*. 12. 106. 10.1186/s12978-015-0090-z.
- Ennew, J. (2018). Street children in Asia: A review. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 32(1), 101-116.
- Fergusson, D. M., Lynskey, M. T., & Horwood, L. J. (2019). Childhood abuse and psychiatric disorder in young adulthood: II. Psychiatric outcomes of childhood abuse. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 48(1), 44-51.
- Fergusson, D. M., Lynskey, M. T., & Horwood, L. J. (2000). Childhood sexual abuse and psychiatric disorder in young adulthood: II. Psychiatric outcomes of childhood sexual abuse. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 34(10), 1365-1374.
- Fernando, S., Wickramage, K., & Perera, B. (2019). Setting the agenda for research on sex work in Sri Lanka: A systematic review. *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*, 31(3), 193-204. doi:10.1177/1010539519832099
- Fisher, B. S., Cullen, F. T., & Turner, M. G. (2000). *The victimization of women: Law, policies, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Gracia-Huidobro D., Lissi, M. R., Gonzalez, A. (2020). Psychosocial dimensions of child development: Asystematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 571151.
- Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. University of California Press.
- Ikechebelu, Joseph & Udigwe, Gerald & Ezechukwu, Clement & Ndinechi, A & Joe-Ikechebelu, Ngozi. (2008). Sexual abuse among juvenile female street hawkers in Anambra State, Nigeria. *African journal of reproductive health*. 12. 111-9. 10.2307/25470654.
- Jasinski, Jana & Wesely, Jennifer & Mustaine, Elizabeth & Wright, James. (2005). Document Title: The Experience of Violence in the Lives of Homeless Women: A Research Report. *American Journal of Public Health*. 6.
- Jayasuriya-Illesinghe, Vathsala & Wijewardena, Kumudu & Axemo, Pia. (2011). Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the Capital Province of Sri Lanka: Prevalence, Risk Factors, and Help Seeking. *Violence against women*. 17. 1086-102. 10.1177/1077801211417151.
- Johnson, L. F., Decker, M. R., & Raj, A. (2018). Sexual abuse and exploitation among urban female and male youth experiencing homelessness in seven global cities. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 82, 217-229. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.04.008
- Jr, J.R.. (2000). The civil rights remedy of the Violence Against Women Act: A defense. *Harvard journal on legislation*. 37. X.
- Kaiser, Elma & Sinanan, Allison. (2019). Survival and Resilience of Female Street Children Experiencing Sexual Violence in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*. 29. 1-20. 10.1080/10538712.2019.1685615.
- Kelly, L. (1988). *Surviving sexual violence*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Kendall-Tackett, K., Williams, L., & Finkelhor, D. (1993). Impact of sexual abuse on children: A review and synthesis of recent empirical studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 113(1), 164-180.
- Kimerling, R., Alvarez, J., Pavao, J., Kaminski, A., Baumrind, N., & Bryant, N. (2007). Prevalence and psychological correlates of childhood sexual abuse in a national sample of men and women. *Child abuse & neglect*, 31(7), 907-927. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2007.03.022
- Koirala, S., Shah, P., & Thapa, N. (2020). Street girls in Nepal: Exploring their realities and vulnerabilities. *Journal of Social Work*, 20(5), 748-769.
- Lalor, Kevin. (1999). *Street Children: A Comparative Perspective*. *Child abuse & neglect*. 23. 759-70. 10.1016/S0145-2134(99)00047-2.
- Lemert, E. M. (1972). *Human deviance, social problems, and social control*. Prentice-Hall.

- Messerschmidt, J. W. (1993). *Masculinities and crime: Critique and reconceptualization of theory*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Moura, S., (2002). The Social Construction of Street Children: Configuration and Implications. *British Journal of Social Work - BRIT J SOC WORK*. 32. 353-367. 10.1093/bjsw/32.3.353.
- Mulyadi, S., McCord, E., & Widom, C. S. (2019). Vulnerability to victimization: A meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 89, 135-146.
- Nada, A. A., Suliman, M. A., & AlSarheed, A. A. (2016). Street girls in Saudi Arabia: Victimization, abuse, and coping strategies. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 31(10), 1769-1792.
- Naker, D., Diarra, N., & Oumar, F. (2019). Exploring the conceptualization of street-connectedness: A qualitative study of street-connected children and stakeholders in Uganda. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 96, 104091.
- Nayak, B. K., & Padhy, S. K. (2019). Living on the edge: A study on the vulnerabilities and health needs of street girls in Bhubaneswar city, Odisha, India. *Indian Journal of Public Health*, 63(3), 254-258.
- Nelson, E. C., Saunders, B. E., & Landsman, M. J. (2016). The nature and impact of sexual abuse in adulthood. In *Sexual abuse and the sexual offender: Common man or monster?* (pp. 23-46). Routledge.
- Patalay, P., Fitzsimons, E. (2019). Mental ill-health among children of the new century: Trends across childhood with a focus on age 14. *PloS ONE*, 14(6), e0217739.
- Patel, D. R., & Shah, S. (2019). Gender disparities and implications for health and well-being of girl children in India. *Indian Pediatrics*, 56(12), 1015-1022.
- Pathiraja, Dasuni & Pathiraja, Ramya & Senanayake, Lakshmen & Edirisinghe, Rukshani & Mapitigama, Nethanjalie. (2020). Gender-based violence: Experiences from two tertiary care settings in Sri Lanka. *F1000Research*. 9. 269. 10.12688/f1000research.23120.1.
- Paolucci, E. O., Genius, M. L., & Violato, C. (2001). A meta-analysis of the published research on the effects of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Psychology*, 135(1), 17-36.
- Penal Code (Amendment) Act, No.22. (1995). Chapter 19, Section 365B. Retrieved from <https://www.lawnet.gov.lk/penal-code-2/>
- Pereda, N., Guilera, G., Forns, M., & Gómez-Benito, J. (2009). The prevalence of child sexual abuse in community and student samples: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 29(4), 328-338.
- Perera, B. (2018). Women's health and wellbeing: Insights from qualitative research in Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka Journal of Psychiatry*, 9(1), 21-25. doi:10.4038/sljspsyc.v9i1.8111
- Ratnayake, R. M. K. S., & Amarasinghe, H. S. (2017). The social epidemiology of child abuse in Sri Lanka: A systematic review. *Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*, 46(1), 1-10.
- Raymond, M., Maves, E., & Kohli, A. (2020). Violence and resilience: Understanding street-connected girls' experiences of abuse and exploitation. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 109, 104719. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104719
- Richie, B. E. (1996). *Compelled to crime: The gender entrapment of battered Black women*. Routledge.
- Romans, S. E., Martin, J. L., & Mullen, P. E. (1997). Childhood sexual abuse and later psychological problems: Neither necessary nor sufficient. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health*, 7(4), 327-338.
- Sampson, R. J., & Groves, W. B. (1989). Community structure and crime: Testing social-disorganization theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(4), 774-802.
- Senaratna, Chamara & Wijewardhana, Niranji. (2012). Risk behaviour of street children in Colombo. *The Ceylon medical journal*. 57. 106-11. 10.4038/cmj.v57i3.4047.
- Senaratna, Chamara & Wijewardhana, Niranji. (2013). Street children in Colombo: What brings them to and sustains them on the streets?. *Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*. 42. 70-75. 10.4038/slch.v42i2.5626.
- Shaw, C. R., & McKay, H. D. (1942). *Juvenile delinquency and urban areas: A study of rates of delinquents in relation to differential characteristics of local communities in American cities*. University of Chicago Press.

- Silbert, Mimi & Pines, Ayala. (1981). Child Abuse as an Antecedent to Prostitution. *Child Abuse & Neglect - CHILD ABUSE NEGLECT*. 5. 407-411. 10.1016/0145-2134(81)90050-8.
- Silva, T. C., Jayasundara, D., Handapangoda, W. M. (2021). Psychological distress among sexually abused adolescents: A cross-sectional study in Sri Lanka. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 118, 105251. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105251
- Silva, T., Vidanapathirana, M. (2022). The Types and Determinants of Child Abuse in Sri Lanka. *Asian Review of Social Sciences*. 11. 36-44. 10.51983/arss-2022.11.1.3077.
- Sisay M. M., Ismail S., Kumie A., Kebede F., Fikreab. (2002). Sexual Violence among Female Street Adolescents in Addis Ababa, April 2000. *Ethiopian Journal of Health Development*. 16. 10.4314/ejhd.v16i2.9802.
- Slaughter-Defoe, D., Nakamura, N., Johnson, P. (2019). Culture and childhood: The cultural protection and promotion of child development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 70, 341-368.
- Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control: How men entrap women in personal life*. Oxford University Press.
- Stoltenborgh, M., van Ijzendoorn, M. H., Euser, E. M., & Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J. (2011). A global perspective on child sexual abuse: Meta-analysis of prevalence around the world. *Child Maltreatment*, 16(2), 79-101.
- Sutherland, E. H. (1947). *Principles of criminology*. Lippincott.
- Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., Hamby, S., & Finkelhor, D. (2016). Community disorder, victimization exposure, and mental health in a national sample of youth. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 57(1), 33-49.
- Toscano, F., Bettin, A., & Jackson, Y. (2018). The socioecological model of child maltreatment: A conceptual framework for preventing child sexual abuse in schools. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 27(4), 385-401.
- Uk, Www & Sharmila, Khwairakpam & Kaur, Sukhminder. (2014). Experiences of Abuse Among Street Children: Nature, Magnitude and Practices. *American Journal of Advance Drug Delivery*. 2. 387-396.
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>
- United Nations. (2000). *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*. Retrieved from <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CTOC/index.html>
- United Nations. (2020). *Street Children*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/street->
- Uk, Www & Sharmila, Khwairakpam & Kaur, Sukhminder. (2014). Experiences of Abuse Among Street Children: Nature, Magnitude and Practices. *American Journal of Advance Drug Delivery*. 2. 387-396.
- Wickramage, K., Simpson, P., & Abbasi, A. (2019). Forced labor and women's health in Sri Lanka. In R. Bhugra & K. Bhui (Eds.), *Textbook of cultural psychiatry* (2nd ed., pp. 379-389). Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, J., (1988). *Address Unknown: The Homeless in America*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Verma, R., Pulerwitz, J., Mahendra, V., Khandekar, S., Barker, G., & Fulpagare, A. (2019). Gender norms and economic empowerment intervention to reduce intimate partner violence against women in rural Maharashtra, India: A cluster randomized controlled trial. *Global Health Action*, 12(1), 1660036. doi:10.1080/16549716.2019.1660036
- Zweig, Janine & Sayer, Aline & Crockett, Lisa & Vicary, Judith. (2002). Adolescent Risk Factors for Sexual Victimization A Longitudinal Analysis of Rural Women. *Journal of Adolescent Research - J ADOLESCENT RES*. 17. 586-603. 10.1177/074355802237465.