

EDITORIAL

CHILD ABUSE

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When I started my job as a pediatrician in one of the teaching hospitals in Pakistan, I asked one of my colleagues 'Do you see child battering in this country?' The prompt answer was... 'NO! We see wife battering not child battering'.

But as the days and months passed and an avalanche of human problems started emerging in front of my eyes, the situation was entirely different.

How do we define child battering? Is it just physical abuse? The answer is no. Child abuse can be in many forms: Mental Abuse, Emotional Abuse Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Moral and Ethical Abuse and perhaps in its most important and subtle form... Child Neglect.¹

I found intentional and unintentional child abuse so common in its many forms with or without awareness by all concerned, that it was appalling; the concerned including older siblings, Parents, doctors and the society in general.

Statistics from the U.S alone indicate reports of 50,000 victims per week of child abuse or neglect; ¹ approximately 60% of these suffer from parental neglect, defined as 'caretaker failure to provide for the child's basic need's. An average of nearly four children die every day as a result of child abuse or neglect (1,400 in 2002).

First of all sex discrimination of children – preferential attention and care of a male child, so a female child is abused in some way from the very beginning, e.g. easy attitude towards their education, nutrition, medical treatment and for that matter on many other aspects of life. ²

Secondly, producing a large number of children with very little spacing without paying attention to the quality of their life. Simple answer "Allah will give". The question arises in the observer's mind, is it insecurity? Is it unemployment, so that they want crowds around them and a lot of small helping hands?

The most pathetic form of abuse in my experience was child neglect. If a child is physically battered but immediately recognized and taken care of, is that a more serious problem or is a large number of children or any particular child, abused in a subtle manner unobserved, unaware of over long period and perhaps never taken care of A bigger problem? Why is a child brought into hospital in a moribund form? Is this cultural and social problem so

heavy that the penalty can be our own children? A serious question to answer...!

The overall personal interests of adults dominate their children's interests and welfare. Population of Pakistan is 160 million, of which children aged 5-14 years form about 40 million of the child population. ³ 80% of people live in rural areas and a large majority of them in such remote lands where there is no transport system, no hospitals, no schools, especially for girls. There is no proper sanitation system. So the overwhelming problem of neglect is obvious and understandable. Most of the times a child cannot be treated properly and is shown anywhere to ease the conscience (though temporarily) maybe even to the lucky and rich nearest quack. So haste goes waste. The same child is brought later with mismanaged disease and expected sequelae for the poor doctor to handle. Is this not neglect, maybe not by the poor ignorant parents, but by the authorities and the conditions that the majority of people live in?

Long-term problems, e.g. rheumatic fever, first of all why should they still exist and be so common? No adequate measures are taken on prevention of disease. Patient compliance is lost for reasons well understood.

Child with diabetes: I have seen in my hospital a child patient begging for insulin in the hospital corridors, parents nowhere to be seen; deliberate and undeniable lack of taking responsibility by the parents and authorities. So many precious lives are lost because the problems cannot be coped with.

Mental and emotional abuse is not even recognized or even if it is, it is not voiced by a society more bothered about other mundane problems of life.

Sexual abuse is not projected because of the stigma, especially in a female who will be permanently rejected by the society and even by her own kith and kin. Moreover it has been projected as on the rise, from the few research reports published in Pakistan in this connection. ⁴

Child beggars, among other so-called 'Street Children' ... children are made to beg by organized groups. Even in a society where females are supposed to be conservative, grown up females are seen on the streets begging. Obviously and evil consequences of sexual abuse are well understood by their elders.

These groups dislike counseling of job offers or advice about education.

Child labor is very common, with the estimated number of working children (ages 5 – 14 years) being 3.3 million.³ Small children are employed in factories, shops and fieldwork. Females often work in fields and as domestic helps. They are at risk of sexual abuse more often than young boys.

Child trafficking is a well known fact. Girls are often married / sold off, while young, for money in some of the tribal areas. Child trafficking is a frequent phenomenon in the countries of Southeast Asia, with Pakistan contributing over 300,000 children to both internal trafficking and cross border trafficking to and from Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India.³ Over 19,000 boy jockeys aged 2 – 11 years have been trafficked to the Middle East from Pakistan as estimated in November 2004.³

In western countries, predominant contributory factors to child abuse seem to be overwork, single parent child, parental discord or a child perhaps different from others. In our society, it is large family size, lack of education, poverty, improper health system, and dangerous factors like quackery and an overall disorganized system.

There are very few shelter homes, orphanages which take care of small minority of homeless children but they cannot give them individual care and guidance.

As the problem is a vast one in a society where so many other factors are a priority, no real statistics are available as yet. Also it is difficult to set out criteria of child abuse or neglect. AT PRESENT EVEN WE THE DOCTORS NEVER LABEL A CHILD AS ABUSED. Is this unconscious denial again a form of neglect, or are we taking this serious problem for granted?

We have to open our eyes to the fact that child abuse in all its forms is unfortunately overwhelmingly greater than the mind can accept!

Compulsory school education of all children is a crucial step to check this problem.

Law enforcement is a must to stop child labor. Beggar organizations have to be eradicated.

Marriage age, at present 18 for boys and 16 for girls, is still very young and is not observed by people.

Law should be strict about it.⁵ Despite recommendations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its thirty-fourth meeting in October 2003.⁶ to raise the marriage ages of girls to 18, this, along with many other recommendations, has not been implemented.

Educationists and doctors must not refrain from labeling a child as neglected or abused. This can be among the first steps for awareness of the general public about this important matter. Recognition of the problem is the key point for its correction.

We all have to join hands to make an effort to spread this message by verbal, written and practical means.

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