

Welcome Speech  
‘At Home or Outside: How Safe is my Child?’  
23/1/13, ICG

A very good morning to all of you and a warm welcome to this seminar on ‘At Home or Outside: How Safe is my Child?’ Thank you for sparing your valuable time to be here to discuss and deliberate on an issue that is slowly making our society hollow and will cause a major collapse of all value systems if timely action is not taken.

It can be very difficult to talk about child abuse or more specifically child sexual abuse, which we are discussing today, and even more difficult to acknowledge that sexual abuse of children of all ages including infants happens every day. This has become the subject of great community concern and the focus of many legislative and professional initiatives. This is evidenced by the expanding body of literature, public declarations by adult survivors and increased media coverage of child rape issues.

According to the World Health Organisation, child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. It targets sexuality and/or sexual organs, involves sexual gestures, words, pictures, actions.

It can result in both short-term and long-term harm, including psychopathology in later life. Indicators and effects include depression, anxiety, eating disorders, poor self-esteem, sleep disturbances, and dissociative and anxiety disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder. While children may exhibit regressive behaviours such as a return to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting, the strongest indicator of sexual abuse is sexual acting out and inappropriate sexual knowledge and interest. Victims may withdraw from school and social activities and exhibit various learning and behavioural problems including cruelty to animals, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Teenage pregnancy and risky sexual behaviors may appear in adolescence. Child sexual abuse victims report almost four times as many incidences of self-inflicted harm.

According to Wikipedia the global prevalence of child sexual abuse has been estimated at 19.7% for females and 7.9% for males, according to a 2009 study published in *Clinical Psychology Review* that examined 65 studies from 22 countries. Using the available data, the highest prevalence rate of child sexual abuse geographically was found in Africa (34.4%), primarily South Africa; Europe showed the lowest prevalence rate (9.2%); America and Asia had prevalence rates between 10.1% and 23.9%. In the past, other research has concluded similarly that in North America, for example, approximately 15% to 25% of women and 5% to 15% of men were sexually abused when they were children. Most sexual abuse offenders are acquainted with their victims; approximately 30% are relatives of the child, most often brothers, fathers, uncles or cousins; around 60% are other acquaintances such as 'friends' of the family, babysitters, or neighbors; strangers are the offenders in approximately 10% of child sexual abuse cases. Most child sexual abuse is committed by men; studies show that women commit 14% to 40% of offenses reported against boys and 6% of offenses reported against girls. Some shocking statistics from India- 53% of children have faced some amount of sexual abuse; 6% of children report having been sexually assaulted; in 50% cases the abuser was in a relationship of trust with the child.

It is important at this stage, to separate the broader issue of child abuse from the specific one of child sexual abuse. Child abuse is primarily emotional and mental or even physical and encompasses a much wider gamut of actions.

While releasing the report on child abuse in India, Women and Child Development Minister Renuka Chowdhury said, "Child abuse is shrouded in secrecy and there is a conspiracy of silence around the entire subject." This is only one of the many problems faced by those working in social development, legislation and justice, both in government and non-government bodies. The above-mentioned report for instance says, "One of the major problems in understanding the scope of the subject of 'child abuse' is that it is extremely difficult to get responses from children on such a sensitive subject because of their inability to fully understand the different dimensions of child abuse and to talk about their experiences. It is therefore difficult to gather data on abused children." Child

rights activists argue that the problem may not be the child's inability to speak about sensitive subjects, as much as the lack of skills on the part of the questioners to create the environment and the trust required to enable the child to share his/her experiences.

Currently, the Indian Constitution recognises various crimes against children that are linked to their sexual abuse – The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act that protects children below the age of 16 from being used for the purposes of commercial sex. The Juvenile Justice Act Section 26 (Exploitation of Juvenile or Child Employee) provides for punishment if a person procures a juvenile for hazardous employment. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act also makes punishable the practice of marrying girls under the age of 18 and boys under the age of 21. In addition to these legislations there is also a commission for the protection of the rights of children which inquires into various violations of child rights and recommends initiation of proceedings as seen necessary.

The Parliament last year approved the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Bill, 2011, to protect children below 18 from sexual abuse, set up special courts for speedy trial of cases against them and provided stringent punishment extending up to life term for offenders. In fact the bill is gender neutral. It seeks to protect children from sexual offences; and the burden of proof will be on the accused. As per the Bill, "whoever commits penetrative sexual assault on children shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which shall not be less than seven years but which may extend to imprisonment for life and shall also be liable." –Despite this stringent law-we still have rape taking place of underage children and even infants.

There has to be a stricter implementation- also most of the time the child is misunderstood-how and what the child says is not legal terminology and the words are conveniently played around by the defense lawyer- this is something which we must discuss in this seminar.-the language of the law.

It is important to understand that sexual offences against children can and is committed in all these situations – marriage, trafficking, and employment -- and in many more. It is equally important to understand the kinds of social and legislative circumstances that allow for and may even be a reason for sexual abuse. Interactions with people in slums in urban centres for instance, reveals that many get their children married young to protect them from sexual abuse. Once a girl attains puberty she begins to be seen as sexually available. For some parents marriage is the only way to ensure that the girl is ‘unavailable’ to others for abuse.

A number of children go missing every year – some are sold by their families, some are kidnapped, others lured by the promise of a better life both for themselves and their kin. According to CRY (Child Rights and You) 8,945 children go missing in India every year, 500,000 children are estimated to be forced into the sex trade every year, approximately 2 million child commercial sex workers are between the ages of 5 and 15 years, approximately 3.3 million child commercial sex workers are between 15 and 18 years, Children form 40% of the total population of commercial sex workers, 80% of these children are found in the five metros – Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore, 71% of them are illiterate.

It is thus apparent that a network of deprivations and vulnerabilities – poverty, age, gender, caste, lack of safe spaces, lack of schools, lack of proper institutional care for children without functional families -- create situations where children are sexually exploited. While some psychologists do argue that violators are ‘psychopathic’ or ‘dysfunctional’ in various ways, it is important to identify and engage with the many ways in which children become disempowered in our society so that they are seen as easy targets of sexual oppression.

The recent shocking rape incident of a 7- year old girl during school hours points out towards the lack of safety of children in schools. Children are neither safe inside their homes nor outside. Schools are considered second homes where it is the responsibility of

the teachers and school authorities to take care of the children but as evident, there have been cases of severe lapse there too.

Let us understand one thing that violence against women and children does not occur in isolation. As much as we reassess the legal and administrative breakdown, the role of popular culture, of films and media in objectifying women and perpetrating gender prejudices cannot be discounted. When young boys talk about girls degradingly, we overlook it by justifying that boys will be boys; when films tell us that it's alright to tease women, we accept it as entertainment; when television shows and advertising peddle stereotypes, we do not even question them. Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar says, "The propagation of the idea of the body as a field of entertainment by the media and entertainment industries is nothing short of a perversion." Due to all these reasons, gender sensitization is a must. Gender sensitizing "is about changing behavior and instilling empathy into the views that we hold about our own and the other sex. And let us not forget that this begins at home.

I personally feel what is needed is a change of mindset. It is no use blaming the police or security. We have to change our mindset of how we treat our children, especially the girl child. No man is born violent; it is the environment that the child experiences at home and in the school that is responsible for their future behaviour. Boys pick up the ill-treatment of their mothers or sisters by their fathers at home and daughters pick up the feeling of inferiority and insecurity. Sons have to be taught to respect women and daughters should be made to feel confident and that they are not inferior to boys in any way. I strongly advocate teaching of moral science in schools again as it teaches values, which are slowly being eroded by our fast pace of life. There has been enough of blame game. It is time now for introspection and change in mindset. We also need to come up with stringent measures to deal with these issues during this seminar.

The media is doing a good job by exposing such incidents and should continue to do so. And finally, let us not forget the role of the civil society-that is all of us sitting here- as Gandhi said- let us be the change we want to see around us.

Before I end I would like to thank all the resource persons for accepting our invite to present their views for the seminar. I hope we come up with very strong suggestions and recommendations which will be sent to the government for immediate implementation. Fight to eradicate this social evil of child abuse should continue. We need to have follow ups and organise more such seminars and ICG will always support this cause. Thank you.