

Sexual Abuse

Data from Clinical Experience

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Abstract: Sexual abuse in India among the populace at large and particularly within the Church circles has not received much attention. However, there is a growing awareness of its existence and expression of concern about it today. After analyzing the data the study points out there is no evidence to support the assumption held by some that sexually abused women tend to enter religious life or that religious life is a refuge for sexually wounded women.

Keywords: sexual abuse, religious life, clinic experience, coping with sexual abuse.

There has been a growing concern in recent years about sexual abuse, especially by the clergy. Very recently there was renewed media coverage (see Butterfield & Hontz 2002: 6; Jose 2002: 9). There is much anger in the United States of America about alleged inaction and even cover-ups by ecclesiastical authorities there when the matter was brought to their notice. However, Church authorities today are taking a serious view of sex abuse, particularly pedophilia within its ranks (*The New Leader*, February 16-28, 2002: 13; May 16-31, 2002: 13). In his *Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 2002*, Pope John Paul II publicly acknowledged the prevalence of sexual abuse by the clergy (though not directly mentioning it by name). He wrote: "As priests, we are personally and profoundly afflicted by the sins of some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of ordination in succumbing even to the most grievous forms of the *mysterium iniquitatis* at work in the world" (*L'Osservatore Romano* March 27, 2002: 8). The situation in the United States was considered serious

enough for Pope John Paul II to call the US Cardinals over to the Vatican to discuss the matter. Consequently the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops met for three days in June, 2002, to address the issue (*The New Leader*, July 1-15, 2002: 13; USCCB: 2002). The problem of sexual abuse within the Church is not restricted to the United States. The media has been reporting such abuses in Ireland, Australia and elsewhere (Horgan 2000; *The Hindu*, June 4, 2002: 15; *The New Leader*, May 1-15, 2001: 17).

Sexual abuse in India among the populace at large and particularly within Church circles has not received much attention. However, there is a growing awareness of its existence and expression of concern about it today. There are occasional media reports (*The New Leader*, July 1-15, 2001: 25). Pinki Virani's *Bitter Chocolate* (2000) was a harsh eye opener for many people. Virani reported statistics from studies by various organizations that showed high prevalence rates of sexual abuse in India.

According to the *World Health Organization* one out of every ten children in India is being sexually abused at any given point of time (Virani 2000: 19). A *Tata Institute of Social Sciences* study in 1985 among adults between the ages 20 and 24 showed that one out of three girls (30%) were sexually abused as children, and one out of every ten boys (10%). Fifty percent of this child abuse happened at home (Virani 2000: 19).

Sakshi, the Delhi-based organization, which spearheaded work on Child Sexual Abuse in the early 1990's, did a study of 357 school-going girl children, and 63% admitted to having been victims, around half of whom had abusers from within their homes and close family circles (Virani 2000: 20). *RAHI* of Delhi did a survey specifically addressing non-lower-class women. This Child Sexual Abuse survey was conducted among 600 English-speaking middle-and-upper-class women in Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Goa and Chennai. Seventy six percent of these 600 women whose ages ranged from 15 to 66 had been sexually abused in childhood. Forty percent of these abused women had a family member as perpetrator. Seventy one percent were abused by relatives or family friends (Virani 2000: 20).

Other organizations in India working on child rights have collated data that show that five out of every eight girls (62.5%) and three out of every 8 boys (37.5%) are victims of Child Sexual Abuse in India. The Police officially peg Child Sexual Abuse in India at 40% for girls and 25% for boys under the age of 16 (Virani 2000: 21).

What about the situation within the Indian Church? There are some anecdotal accounts of sexual abuse within the Church (Mannath, *The New Leader*, April 1-15, 2002: 1). At the second *National Gathering of Catholic Psychologists and Counsellors (Bosco Psychological Services, 2001)* held in New Delhi last year concern was expressed about the prevalence of sexual abuse, particularly of religious women. It was reported that more than 50% of new recruits have been sexually abused prior to entering religious life. (Some placed that number even higher.) It was also reported that a high percentage of women religious were sexually abused after entering religious life. During the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican, a Superior General from India called for a forum to deal with what she called the “increasing exploitation and abuses” of nuns in India (Bourdeaux 2001: 10). However, there are no reliable research data available to support these claims. The present study is a small effort to provide research-based data on sexual abuse within the Church.

The purpose of the present study was to find what evidence clinical experience offered of the prevalence of sexual abuse within the church. It also sought to learn from Catholic clinicians the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual consequences of sexual abuse they encountered in their clients.

Method

Procedure

One hundred and fifty five Catholic clinicians (all those psychologists and counsellors whose names and addresses were available to the researcher) were mailed a 3-page questionnaire, along with a covering letter that described the purpose and anonymity/confidentiality issues of the study.

The questionnaire defined sexual abuse for the purposes of this research as follows:

Any form of sexual exploitation and/or unwanted sexually-oriented contact with a person of the same or opposite sex, including hugging and kissing (with a sexual intent), genital display, genital fondling, and/or sexual intercourse (attempted and/or completed). Included here are any forms of sexual contact between two persons with unequal power status (e.g. Superior-subject, priest/brother-nun, parish priest-parishioner, teacher-student, counsellor-client) even with mutual consent. (Experiences of mutual sex play and exploration between pre-pubescent children and mutually chosen sexual contact between unrelated adolescents of about the same age are not included here) (Haugaard 2000: 1036-1039; Fortune 1989: 38).

The questionnaire had four sections: a) Some Information about yourself as a Psychotherapist/Counsellor; b) Some Information about your Psychotherapy/Counselling Clients; c) Some Information about the Effects of Sexual Abuse you have Encountered in your Clients; and d) Space for Comments. The questionnaire was to be answered anonymously and returned to the researcher in the stamped envelope provided, by a stipulated date.

Results

Sixty of the 155 questionnaires, that is 38.7%, were returned by the stipulated date. One was returned blank with no explanation. Six were returned unanswered with the explanation that the psychologist was not in clinical practice. Four of the questionnaires could not be utilized for lack of numerical indicators and because of other errors. There were only one layman psychologist and one laywoman psychologist among the respondents. Their questionnaires were excluded so as to make the respondent population homogeneous. That is, data has been collected only from religious or priest clinicians. The number of completed questionnaires used in the analysis of data thus amounted to 47 or 30.32% of the total number surveyed.

Among the respondents were 25 female and 22 male psychologists/counsellors. The mean years of clinical practice were 9.89.

Nearly 77% of them (19 women, 17 men) had a Master's degree in psychology and 23.4% (6 women, 5 men) had a Doctoral degree in psychology.

The total number of clients about whom data were provided by the 47 clinicians was 17522. Of these 3140 were laywomen (17.92%), 2455 laymen (14.01%), 9164 professed religious women (52.3%), 2388 professed religious men (13.63%) and 375 diocesan priests (2.14%). Together there were 12304 women (70.22%) and 5218 men (29.78%). Table 1 and 2 display data on prevalence of sexual abuse.

Table 1

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse: Data from 47 Clinicians

Client		Abused as child	Abused as adult	Lifetime abuse
Category	Number %	Number %	Number %	Number %
Laywomen	3140 17.92	905 28.82	320 10.19	1225 39.01
Laymen	2455 14.01	669 27.25	158 6.44	827 33.69
Religious Women	9164 52.3	2574 28.08	1644 17.94	4218 46.02
Religious Men	2388 13.63	395 16.54	175 7.33	570 23.87
Diocesan Priests	375 2.14	49 13.07	25 6.67	74 19.74
<i>Total</i>	<i>17522</i> <i>100</i>	<i>4592</i> <i>26.21</i>	<i>2322</i> <i>13.25</i>	<i>6914</i> <i>39.46</i>

Table 2***Prevalence rates of Sexual Abuse: Difference among Men and Women***

Client		Abused as child	Abused as adult	Lifetime abuse
Category	Number %	Number %	Number %	Number %
Women	12304 70.22	3479 28.28	1964 15.96	5443 44.24
Men	5218 29.78	1113 21.33	358 6.86	1471 28.19
Total	17522 100	4592 26.21	2322 13.25	6914 39.46

Prevalence of Sexual Abuse

As Table 1 shows, 39.01% of the laywomen in this study had lifetime sexual abuse: 905 or 28.82% during childhood and 320 or 10.19% in adulthood. The lifetime sexual abuse of laymen, however, is 33.69%. Six hundred and sixty-nine, that is 27.25%, were abused in childhood and 158 or 6.44% in adulthood. Although the figures are lower for men than for women, the overall lifetime abuse for men is just 5.32% less than that for women.

The picture is different for religious women. Against 1225 laywomen who suffered lifetime sexual abuse there are 4218 religious women. The percentage for childhood abuse for religious women is slightly less than that for laywomen: 28.08 for religious and 28.82 for laywomen. But the experience of sexual abuse in adulthood for religious women is higher than that for laywomen: 17.94% for religious women against 10.19% for other women. Religious women have the highest rate of lifetime sexual abuse, namely 46.02%.

The picture for religious men and diocesan priests differs. The overall lifetime abuse for diocesans is less than that for religious men: 19.74% for diocesan priests but 23.87 for religious. Abuse in childhood for diocesans is again less than for religious men. Whereas

it is 13.07% for diocesans it is 16.54% for religious men. But when it comes to abuse in adulthood the difference is not that wide. There is only a 0.66% difference between the two groups: 6.67% for diocesans and 7.33% for religious.

When compared with the percentages given for laymen it appears that sexual abuse in adulthood is more frequent for religious men and diocesan priests. Adulthood sexual abuse of laymen is 6.44%, but 7.33% for religious and 6.67% for diocesan priests. The same was noticed between lay and religious women. While 10.19% of laywomen reported adult sexual abuse, 17.94% religious women did so.

As Table 2 shows, 39.46% of the clients in this study reported lifetime sexual abuse: 4592 or 26.21% in childhood and 2322 or 13.25% in adulthood. More women than men reported being abused in childhood as also in adulthood. While 21.33% of the men reported childhood sexual abuse, 28.22% of the women reported such abuse. The difference in the abuse rate of men and women widened considerably in adulthood. While the reported rate for sexual abuse in adulthood for men was 6.86% that of women was more than double at 15.96%. Lifetime abuse of women was considerably higher than of men: 44.24% for women and 28.19% for men.

Overall: in this study 6914 men and women, that is 39.46%, reported lifetime sexual abuse. More women than men were sexually abused in childhood as well as adulthood. The prevalence of sexual abuse in adulthood was considerably higher for religious women and men than for lay women and men.

Discussion and Conclusions

The prevalence rate of childhood sexual abuse of women (28.28%) found in this study is only slightly less than the rates found in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences study (Virani 2000: 19). That study found that 1 out of 3 girls (30%) were sexually abused as children. It is much lower than the 76% rate for non-lower-class women found by RAHI (Virani 2000: 20). However, the rate found in this study (28.28%) falls within the range found in international surveys of childhood sexual abuse. Surveys of child sexual abuse in large

non-clinical populations of adults conducted in at least 21 countries have found rates ranging from 7% to 36% for women (Finkelhor 1994: 409-417). The prevalence rate of 21.33% of child sexual abuse of men as against 28.28% of women found in the present study is rather high. Most international studies have found females to be abused at 1.5 to 3 times the rate for males (Finkelhor 1994: 409-417).

A significant finding from this study is the situation of women religious in regard to sexual abuse. It is noteworthy that more than 50% of those who sought psychotherapy/ counselling are religious women (52.3%), more than almost 3 times that of any of the other 4 groups in the study, laywomen (17.92%), laymen (14.01%), religious men (13.63) and diocesan priests (2.14%). Whether their experience of sexual abuse was a factor in their choosing to have psychotherapy/counselling cannot be concluded from this study, but requires further exploration. The 28.08% prevalence rate for childhood sexual abuse of religious women in this study is much higher than that found in a national survey of the sexual trauma experiences of American Catholic nuns. A 1998 study by Chibnall, Wolf, and Duckro (Chibnall, Wolf & Duckro 1998: 142-167) of 2,500 nuns, randomly selected from the nearly 29,000 names submitted, found the prevalence of child sexual abuse among the American nuns was 18.6%.

A disproportionate number of religious women, compared to the other 4 groups were abused as adults, that is, after entering religious life. While 28.82% lay women were abused in childhood, only 10.19% were abused as adults. Although fewer religious women than laywomen were abused in childhood (28.08% as against 28.82%), a much higher percentage of religious women (17.94) than lay women (10.19) were abused as adults, pushing the lifetime sexual abuse rate for religious women to 46.02%, that is almost 1 in every 2 religious women. This perhaps is the most significant finding from the study. This finding points to a dysfunctional situation in the Church, wherein more religious women are sexually victimized as compared to adult women in the general population. The prevalence rate of sexual abuse of women after entering religious life in this study (17.94%) is also much higher than that in the American nun study cited earlier

(12.5%)(Chibnall, Wolf & Duckro 1998: 151). Our religious women may be an unprotected group in the Church.

However, data from the present study do not support the assumption held by some that sexually abused women tend to enter religious life or that religious life is a refuge for sexually wounded women. The rates for childhood sexual abuse for laywomen (28.82%) and religious women (28.08%, prior to entering religious life) are almost equal. In fact, the rate is slightly higher for laywomen. Also, data show that only less than 3 out of 10 religious women have been sexually abused in childhood.

At the same time, there is data that support the assumption that clients, as well as non-clients, are reluctant to disclose sexual abuse (under reporting). A finding in the American nun study cited earlier is relevant here (Chibnall, Wolf & Duckro 1998: 150, 153). Of those nuns who had been abused in childhood, 23.6% had never discussed the abuse with another person until the study. These women had kept their experience of sexual abuse secret for a mean of 54.3 years. For those who had discussed the abuse, a mean of 24.7 years elapsed between the onset of the abuse and their first disclosure. Of those who discussed the abuse, 47.7% were either in mental health therapy (12.9%) or had had therapy (32.7%) that directly addressed their experience of child sexual abuse. Of those women who were sexually exploited during religious life, 24.7% had never discussed the experience with another person. Of those who had discussed the exploitation, 50.9% were either in mental health therapy (13.9%) or had had therapy (37%) that directly addressed their experience of sexual exploitation. Those who had been exploited by a man were significantly more likely than those exploited by a woman to have discussed the experience with another person (81% vs. 61%, respectively). Across the international epidemiological studies reviewed by Finkelhor cited earlier, only about half the victims had disclosed their abuse experience to anyone (Finkelhor 1994: 411). Thus there is a great deal of secrecy around experiences of sexual abuse; and psychotherapy/counselling appear to provide a safe place where these can be disclosed. This does not mean that religious women sought therapy primarily because they had been sexually abused. It could very well be that having entered therapy for whatever reason, they

found the therapeutic climate conducive to disclosing their sexual abuse experience. It is also likely that not all who had been sexually abused disclosed that experience in psychotherapy/counselling. This being so, the actual prevalence rates of sexual abuse in the population studied could be higher than what the figures indicate.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study have to be noted. The data are based on the recollections of psychotherapists and counsellors. For those who have not kept accurate records of their clinical encounters, recollections after a period of some years can be defective or erroneous. Moreover, clinicians' reports are based on the self-report of clients. There is no guarantee that the abuse happened as reported.

Further, data of this study come from a clinical (those seeking help of psychotherapist/counsellor) population. Can conclusions drawn from this data be generalized to non-clinical populations? There is a common assumption that those who seek psychotherapy/counselling are more traumatized than those who do not. At the same time, many persons, within and without religious life, who are victimized, do not, as noted earlier, disclose their abuse experience and seek help. Thus, an assumption that there is a greater prevalence of sexual abuse in the clinical population need not always be true.

The objectives of the present study were limited to examining the prevalence of sexual abuse among a clinical population, and the physical, emotional and spiritual impact of the abuse manifested by the clients. The impact will be described in a forthcoming article in this Journal. Further research is needed to ascertain the prevalence rate of sexual abuse among non-clinical populations, as also to know who the perpetrators of abuse are, what factors lead to sexual abuse in childhood as well as in adulthood and to ascertain what role the experience of sexual victimization plays in motivation to enter or abandon religious life or priesthood.

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Article received: Jan 12, 2003

Article approved: Feb 16, 2003

No of words: 3, 490