

# PARENTING CULTURE

## SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH ASIAN COMMUNITIES



### IN THIS ISSUE

**SEXUAL ABUSE AND RATES OF VICTIMIZATION IN SOUTH ASIAN CHILDREN**

**WHY SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION IS HIGH IN “CONSERVATIVE” COUNTRIES AND THE IMPACTS ON SEXUAL EDUCATION/ADVOCACY**

**A BEGINNER'S GUIDE: CLASSIC LITERATURE**

## Sexual Abuse and Rates of Victimization in South Asian Children

*Dr. Anjali Ferguson and Dr. Shanta Kanukollu*

### Sexual Violence

Is used to describe both sexual assault and sexual abuse, whereas ‘sexual abuse’ refers to any form of coerced or forced sexual interaction between an individual and another person or group. It includes any sexual act committed without the victim’s consent, even if they unwillingly submit to that sexual act and/or the perpetrator is unaware that they have not consented. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) refers to sexual violence of children

### Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)

has been found to significantly impact a child’s neurological development, academic outcomes, success in adulthood, satisfaction in relationships, and their mental health overall across the lifespan.

Detailed statistics for South Asian communities are lacking due to barriers to disclosure (i.e. secrecy encouraged by the family, shame felt by victims, the chance of not being believed, low likelihood of prosecution.)

#### Recent estimates have found the following:

- In 2015- sexual offenses and kidnapping accounted for 81% of crimes against minors in India
- Prevalence ranges from 4-41% among SA women under 18yo and 4-57% among SA boys in educational settings under 18yo.
- 94.8% of sexual assault cases were by someone they knew (not strangers) to include neighbors and direct family members. (When violence occurs within South Asian families, the perpetrator is often not the victim's spouse but rather other family members and it is more likely that there will be multiple perpetrators).

The research on reporting of CSA and getting help in the South Asian community is challenging.

Patriarchal societal norms and power differentials can impact risk. Class and caste are also significant themes to consider within SA communities.

If you suspect your child or someone you know has been impacted by sexual abuse: please contact your local child protection agency or talk to someone at the following agencies for more guidance:

Sakhi

Manavi

Raksha

Apna Ghar

## Why Sexual Victimization is High in “Conservative” Communities and the Impacts on Sexual Education/Advocacy

*Dr. Anjali Ferguson and Dr. Shanta Kanukollu*

“Conservative” and highly patriarchal communities are ones that reinforce traditional gender norms and provide limited education on sexuality and sexual development. Conservative communities that have poor sexuality education tend to have higher rates of sexual victimization

Sexual education research suggests that healthy sexual development is formed through explicit education and conversation. (i.e. abstinence only programs are not effective). In communities where no explicit education is had about sex, children are at risk for CSA.



In South Asian communities sex and sexuality is considered taboo. Often, discussions or even minor physical displays of affection (hugging partners) is frowned upon. Healthy and normalized conversation about sex and sexuality has been shown to mitigate sexual violence.

Given that a South Asian woman's status is primarily linked to her ability to marry and have children, it is likely that family expectations play a role in silencing experiences of healthy sexuality and even experiences of child sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse disclosure in South Asian communities is often hampered by:

- lack of basic knowledge of child sexual abuse
- lack of awareness of services available to respond
- fear of public exposure if CSA was disclosed
- fear of meeting culturally insensitive responses from professionals
- cultural factors (e.g. izzat [honor/respect], haya [modesty] and sharam[shame/embarrassment])



The patriarchal and conservative nature of sexuality in many South Asian communities places women and children at greater risk for:

- sexual violence
- intergenerational transmissions of maladaptive sexualized behaviors.
- additional mental health concerns like anxiety and depression

Here are some South Asian-focused resources for discussions around sexuality and gender norms:

Masala Podcast @soulsutras

The Indian Feminist @the\_indian\_feminist

Pink Ladoo @pinkladoo

The Diatribe Podcast @thediatribepodcast

SASMHA @southasiansmh

Dr. Samosa @doctor.samosa



## How South Asian Parents can Advocate for their Children. Tips, Considerations, Resources

*Dr. Anjali Ferguson and Dr. Shanta Kanukollu*

If your child shares that they have been sexually abused, believe them.

This is crucial.

- **Talk about genitalia/private parts** (by their actual names) early. It may feel uncomfortable if you weren't raised with this language but let's normalize it.
- **Let your child say "no"** to people in the community if they don't want to be hugged or kissed. Body boundaries are important. Do not force your child to physically touch, hug, or embrace someone they do not want to regardless of relation (yes, even grandparents).
- **Reassure your child** that they will never be shamed for something they share with you regarding their body. This is also something you may be uncomfortable with if you never had a parent do this for you but we can always learn!
- **Tell your child that these rules apply even with people they know.** (This is often the case for South Asian children - the abuse happens from someone the family knows.)
- **Do not encourage your child to "get over it"** or "just keep quiet about it". This will only contribute to feelings of sadness, shame, fear etc., which may impact mental health.
- **Advocate for your child** with family and community members. Children need advocates throughout development and especially during difficult experiences. Be a voice of support and protection for your child.
- **Find a supportive community.** It can be hard to stand up for individual needs in a collectivist and patriarchal society. Find groups or family members that can be compassionate and supportive when you advocate for your child. Sometimes the fear of isolation can stop us from speaking up.
- **Find a mantra to guide you.** Sometimes it can feel like supporting our children through this process is going against family and culture, but remember our children need us as their voice. Find a mantra/phrase like: (e.g. "I am protecting my child, "I am breaking a generational cycle," "I am doing what is necessary to keep my child safe/healthy") that you can recite to yourself to keep you grounded and remind you of the importance of your support.

Shanta N. Kanukollu (a.k.a "Dr. K") has over a decade of clinical experience working with clients of diverse backgrounds in the forensic and medical settings. She has also taught courses related to diversity and gender at The Chicago School of Professional Psychology and Northwestern University. Shanta was a recipient of the Minority Fellowship Award during her graduate career at The University of Michigan, where she obtained her doctorate in Clinical Psychology and Women's Studies. She currently has her own private practice in downtown Chicago where she provides psychotherapy to adults from diverse backgrounds. Shanta provides education and outreach regarding mental health outcomes in ethnic minority communities through her writing and professional speaking engagements across the country



# WELCOME!

## A NOTE FROM OUR FOUNDER

----- Anjali Ferguson, PH.D.

Welcome to Parenting Culture; a resource and community promoting an inclusive and culturally responsive space for parenting dialog.

My name is Anjali Gowda Ferguson and I am an Indian American clinical psychologist with parenting, early childhood mental health and trauma-informed care. I recently started my own parenting journey and am continually struck by the lack of culturally responsive parenting resources.

While I specialized in parenting well before becoming a parent myself, I often found it hard to resonate with existing interventions. They never seemed to represent my communities and upbringing. Online and Offline spaces can often feel unwelcoming of my cultural experiences and thoughts. It felt like something was missing in the parenting world.

I hope you find this space helpful in navigating the unspoken challenges of parenting.

