

# **Consequences of Incest: Researching Child Abuse Cases in Iran**

Kameel Ahmady<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this academic paper is to examine the social and psychological consequences of incest, specifically child sexual abuse within the family context. The researchers utilised a background-identification method to ascertain the social, cultural, psychological and biological consequences of incest. The study population consisted of individuals who experienced any form of sexual abuse within their families during childhood. The sample size for the interviews was 452, and the sampling methods used were snowball and purposive. The results of the study demonstrate that sexual violence against children by relatives can have severe and long-lasting consequences. The consequences were categorised into three groups: structural consequences, intermediate consequences and individual consequences. Structural consequences include the weakening of social capital, which refers to the resources available to individuals through their social networks, and the disruption of social relationships and trust. Intermediate consequences include family crises and education, such as the disruption of family roles and functions, early or no marriage, marital tension and divorce, demeaning attitudes towards a gender, contradiction with society and peers, and weakening social ties. Individual consequences include personality and psychological disorders, sexual problems, the creation of national plans or policies that are not well-suited to the sociocultural context of Iran, functional disorders, physical injuries, suicide and self-harm, early maturity, acquaintance with risky sexual and non-sexual behaviours, addiction to sexual relationships, inappropriate attitudes towards body parts, and feelings of fear, anger, self-reproach, guilt, disgust, insecurity, entitlement, humiliation, rejection, isolation, loneliness, anxiety, frustration, shame and revenge. The severity of these consequences depends on various factors, including the type of imposed sexual activity,

---

<sup>1</sup> Researcher and anthropologist: <http://kameelahmady.com> & [Kameel.ahmady@gmail.com](mailto:Kameel.ahmady@gmail.com)

the nature of the familial relationships and the relative relationship of the involved parties, as well as the ages and genders of the victims. Additionally, the study found that prevalent cultural beliefs and social norms in Iranian society can exacerbate the consequences of sexual violence against children by relatives.

**Keywords:** *repercussions of sexual abuse, incest, family, children, Iranian society, same-sex attraction*

# 1. Introduction

*NB: Due to the sensitive and taboo nature of this topic in Iran in terms of some elements of the legal system, religious leaders, and government officials and organisations, the names and identities of certain respondents and groups have been changed or removed.*

The first section of this article explores the reasons for, the factors involved in and the underlying causes of child sexual abuse by relatives in Iranian society. The second section is dedicated to its consequences, which are presented in this article's framework. The primary motivation for and objective of examining the negative consequences of sexual violence against children by relatives is to raise awareness and understanding of this phenomenon and its dimensions. At the same time, the aim is to prevent and mitigate this phenomenon by identifying its negative consequences at the macro, meso, and micro levels, with a focus on children.

The study is grounded in the data collected from interviews and emphasises specific instances to develop effective programmes and policies that will help eliminate this issue in society.

The field of sexual violence in Iranian culture has not been thoroughly explored due to the taboo nature of this phenomenon and limited access to information. National research on this topic is also limited. The dominance of religious authorities, combined with the political situation, has restricted scientific studies and effective supports in the form of medical and legal aid. This dominance, along with denial, which is a historical mechanism present in all layers of Iranian society, has always been a barrier to transparency and addressing such issues.

The few studies conducted by interested researchers indicate the depth of suffering experienced by victims of sexual abuse, including children. Despite the prevalence of this phenomenon in society, not only are appropriate measures not taken to support these victims, but in many cases, social norms and laws impose additional injustices on them. The physical and psychological consequences and the deep trauma, especially in children during their growth periods, are severe. The severity of this damage depends on the nature of the imposed sexual activity, the nature of the familial relationships and the relationship between the parties involved, as well as their ages and genders.

In Iran, women are subject to a number of negative moral labels due to their disadvantaged social positions. Society does not recognise a victim of sexual assault as a normal person or even a victim, but as deviant and criminal. Blaming the victim subjects them to further abuse. This prevents the formation of voluntary supportive and therapeutic actions, as well as the provision of effective rehabilitation services for those who have been harmed (Irvanian, 2010). Thus, it is essential to address this issue due to (1) the conditions that facilitate violence against children, particularly sexual violence; (2) the lack of effective support and sexual education in schools and other organisations; and (3) the social stigma attached to this phenomenon in society, which often prevents victims from reporting it.

The sixth national development plan of Iran, which focused on social issues, paid little attention to children's issues, particularly violence against them, and there was no attention given to children's issues in the country's overall policies. Therefore, considering the prevalence of sexual violence in the family environment and its consequences for those who have experienced it, especially children, it is more important than ever to address this issue. Identifying the consequences of this problem enables policymakers and experts to provide appropriate policies for preventative interventions. Research in this area, in addition to other research, is the starting point for reflection, review and, ultimately, policymaking to address sexual abuse in the family and society. Governments must take this issue seriously because sexual abuse not only violates the dignity, honour and self-esteem of children in childhood and throughout their lives, but also causes psychological harm and can contribute to the perpetuation of the cycle. Therefore, a qualitative approach and field research must be used to answer the following question:

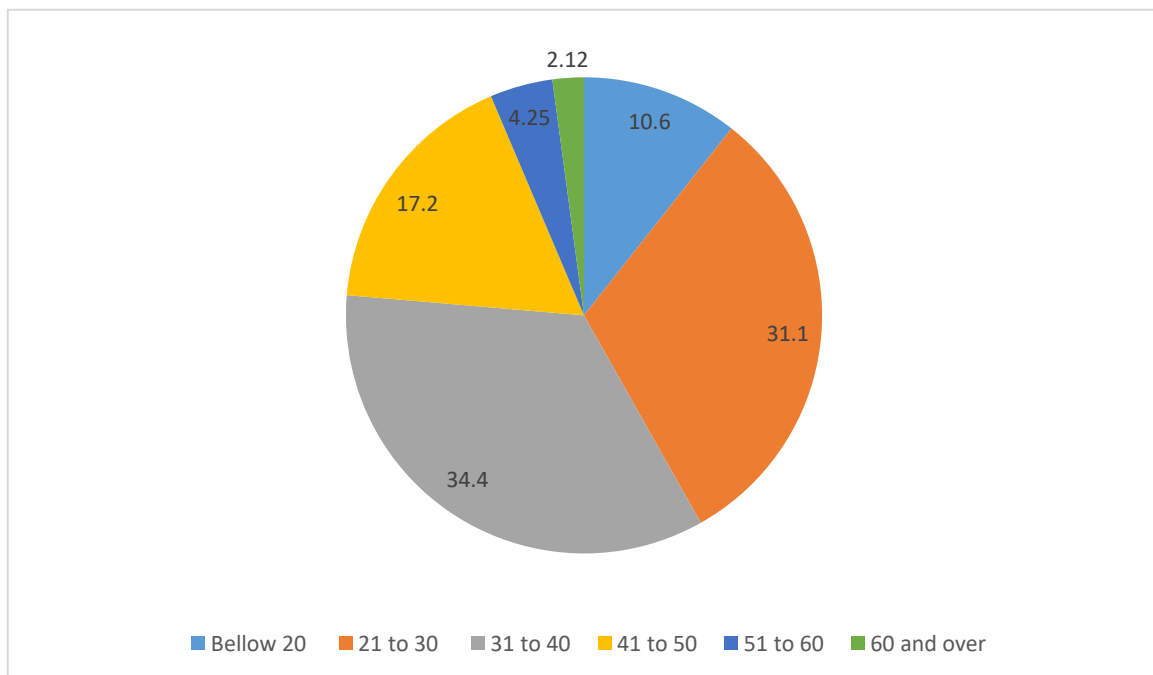
*What are the structural, institutional and individual consequences of the incestuous sexual abuse of children in Iran?*

## **2. Methodology**

Most of the researchers into this matter have been unable to gain access to the worlds of the victimised and the perpetrators because of the taboo nature of the subject, the secrecy and the legal obstacles. To explore it, therefore, a theory must be developed based on real and experimental evidence and data.

Understanding this phenomenon requires gaining the trust of the abused and of perpetrators, as well as understanding the perceptions they have of their experiences and the meanings they make from them. These features can be explored using qualitative methods, specifically grounded theory ('GT'). This method, with the techniques and tools it makes available to the researcher, helps researchers study the bases and causal conditions, reasons, experiences, strategies, and consequences of the phenomenon in question. This current research uses GT for data collection and analysis.

The population under investigation in this study consists of individuals who have experienced any form of sexual abuse within the family during their childhoods; i.e. individuals who were subjected to incestuous abuse before the age of 18. The number of individuals interviewed in this study was 452, and the sampling methods were both snowball and purposive. To collect research data, a semi-structured-interview technique was utilised, and for data analysis, the Strauss and Corbin method of coding was employed.



**Chart 1: Frequency distribution of respondents according to age (%)**

The data for this study was obtained from the following three major sources:

1. *the experiences of individuals who have been subjected to abuse* – this group of individuals, due to their lived experience of abuse and its impacts, is a valuable source of information that can be used in policy-making;
2. *the recommendations of experts and stakeholders* in fields such as psychology, social work, women’s studies, sociology and law, and child specialists, who, due to their practical knowledge, constitute a rich source of information on the topic; and
3. *the literature on child abuse*, which was reviewed for its abundant contributions to the discussion.

### **3. Consequences to Children of Incestuous Sexual Abuse**

One of the most important issues affecting children in Iran is the lack of recognition and differentiation between childhood and adolescence by families and society. As a result, adolescents may face identity issues and experience negative emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, lack of trust and insecurity due to their social environments.

Sexual abuse at this stage can be even more damaging and lead to the continuation and exacerbation of these issues and emotions. In a way, it may solidify an individual’s ambiguous state both personally and socially, preventing them from progressing to the following growth stages and hindering their personal and social development.

Evidence suggests that individuals who have greater resilience and access to resilience resources, such as social support, are better able to overcome the consequences of sexual violence and return to normal lives (Irvanian, 2010).

#### **3.1 Structural Consequences**

##### *3.1.1 Destruction of Social Capital*

Social capital at the individual level is the sum of one’s number of social relationships multiplied by the level of trust inherent in those relationships (Rothstein, 2005, p.25–123). Having trust and security in others is essential for an individual’s important relationships and fosters a sense of social and emotional belonging. In other words, it provides the

possibility for integration into social groups, including the family. On the other hand, when this trust and sense of security are undermined, it leads to social rejection and isolation, and the individual cannot benefit from emotional support and group belonging. Assets such as trust and security bring about social cohesion, and they have significant impacts on an individual's social bonds with groups and society, as well as social cohesion.

Samaneh, a 35-year-old legal expert states:

There was nobody I could find and tell. Nobody who I could trust and truly understand what I was going through. It was like a deep wound that just wouldn't heal. And the worst part was, there was no one and nowhere safe for me to turn to. I needed some kind of security blanket, but there was nothing. I kept telling myself that things would get better, but it was tough to believe it at times.

The acquisition of trust and security by a child from individuals within their close communication networks, such as parents or teachers, is a critical factor. The presence of such individuals creates a perception of reliability and safety, which in turn fosters an environment in which the child can perceive the world as a secure and trustworthy place to inhabit.

In addition to the inner conflicts and disruptions of the sense of security and trust within their social-communication spheres, abused individuals are also likely to develop anti-social sentiments. These sentiments can manifest in various behaviours such as withdrawal and alienation from others, rebellion, extreme violence and incompatibility with their environments and peers. The negative consequences of childhood abuse extend beyond the individual – it has been shown to have a ripple effect on the family and society as a whole.

According to some narratives, children who are subjected to sexual abuse, particularly by family members, exhibit extreme and imbalanced behaviours or a desire to remain unnoticed. They tend to become withdrawn and isolated. A lack of behavioural balance is often observed in such individuals, as they struggle to establish constructive and healthy interactions with their environment. Furthermore, in cases where trust in others is undermined by abuse, this lack of trust extends to other individuals, as well, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust and social isolation.

## **3.2 Intermediate-Level Consequences**

### *3.2.1 Disruption of the Family Institution*

In Iranian society, there is a lack of comprehensive sexual education programmes that could effectively militate against child sexual abuse, and a lack of coordinated policies and supportive social services from institutions and organisations to protect victims of abuse. These deficiencies contribute to the increasing prevalence of such abuses and their persistent, exacerbating consequences.

A 21-year-old, female social-work graduate has reported on these gaps in the system:

I was really scared to talk about it with my mom, to be honest. Our relationship was already strained because of some family issues, and I didn't know how she would react if I tried to open up about my feelings. I wanted to tell her what happened, but I was afraid of her reaction, of being judged or misunderstood. It was tough, and I felt like I had to keep it all to myself. Whenever I did try to talk to her about things, I would get really anxious and nervous, and sometimes, she would react negatively, which made it even harder for me to open up. It's been really hard.

Undoubtedly, childhood sexual abuse has a significant impact on an individual's interpretation of sexual pleasure and the frequency of their sexual relationships. Moreover, if the abuse is perpetrated by someone of the same sex, it can influence the individual's sexual orientation and may have a lasting impact on their future relationships.

The negative effects of childhood sexual abuse can manifest in various ways in an individual's marital relationship and can lead to marital dissatisfaction and even collapse. This study observed that some of the abused individuals experienced serious problems in their marital relationships due to the effects of the abuse and related factors. In some cases, these individuals may feel violated during sexual intercourse or may have distorted perceptions of sexual-service providers. Such misconceptions can lead to serious problems in marital life and emotional relationships with the opposite sex.



### *3.2.2 Early or Delayed Marriage*

Early marriage and delayed marriage are among the consequences of sexual abuse in childhood, and both phenomena have social implications. According to the norms of modesty and honour in Iran, individuals, especially girls, should not engage in sexual relationships before marriage, and if their chastity is violated for any reason, it puts their honour and their family's honour at risk.

In some societies, having a virginity certificate is still considered of value, but when an individual is abused and loses their virginity, it becomes a problem. When suitors come with marriage proposals, the abused individual may fear the disclosure of their situation, which may lead to rejection or divorce in the future. As a result, they may miss out on marriage opportunities. In some cases, a suitor may reject an individual because they do not have a virginity certificate, which becomes an obstacle to marriage for this group of people.

In cases where marriage does occur, the marital relationship may face disturbance or even breakdown due to the impacts of the abuse.

If the abuse becomes revealed, two outcomes are likely. Firstly, the abuser may marry the abused individual to compensate for the damage they have caused, thinking that they have tarnished the victim's reputation. Secondly, the family may marry their daughter off to the first suitor who comes along, regardless of whether he is a suitable match or whether she has reached maturity in various aspects of her life. However, a marriage between the abused individual and their abuser is doomed from the start, because the abuser lacks the mental health to manage their life and family. Moreover, such a marriage may continue to evoke negative emotions such as anger, hatred, anxiety and so on, which can affect the individual's relationship with their spouse and other aspects of their lives.

Additionally, childhood sexual abuse can lead to a diminished desire for marriage. Sexual abuse can shatter a person's sense of trust, safety and security, making it difficult for them to form intimate relationships. The experience can also lead to feelings of shame, guilt and low self-esteem, which can further affect their ability to form healthy relationships.

In some cases, the fear of intimacy and vulnerability that may stem from childhood sexual abuse can lead to a lack of interest in marriage

altogether. The individual may feel that they are safer and more in control of their life when completely avoiding romantic relationships. Moreover, they may fear that intimacy and a sexual relationship will trigger memories of their abuse, making it difficult for them to engage in intimacy.

### **3.3 Micro-Level Consequences**

#### *3.3.1 Psychological and Social Disturbance*

While rape, as a form of sexual violence, may not result in death or physical injury, the psychological and social ramifications of it can persist for years, affecting not only survivors but also their families. The consequences of sexual violence may be immediately apparent or may become evident years after the abuse. Such effects and consequences include loss of trust in parents and family members, anxiety, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm, suicidal tendencies, depression, personality disorders, substance abuse, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, and difficulties with motherhood or the transition to motherhood, which may lead to psychosis.

A 50-year-old, male teacher reported the following:

So, there was this one time during the war when we were all living in one room. I remember waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of my mother's moaning and my father's chattering. I was only eight years old at the time, and I heard my mother moaning in pain while my father was saying, 'Hey, it's nothing' and just continued. It was really weird for me because my father was always so kind and calm to my mother, so I couldn't understand why he was bothering her now.

They were arguing with each other, and their voices were going up and down, and they were moaning, and I couldn't tell which voice was for pain or happiness. I was just dumbfounded that they were doing this while they were asleep. But the next day, when I looked at them, everything seemed normal. It wasn't until a year later when I accidentally walked in on them having sex that I realised what was really going on.

My father didn't say anything, but my mother quickly jumped out of bed and hit my ass. They were making the same sighs and moans that I had heard before. As I got older, I found myself

liking and disliking the sounds and moans I saw in sexy movies, and I even wanted my partners to do the same and make those same sounds. But looking back, I don't think that's normal.

The exposure of children and adolescents to sexual stimuli, such as photos and videos, may increase the likelihood of early puberty. This, in turn, may serve as a basis for early sexual behaviour, negative emotions stemming from physical changes and even rejection by peers. Adolescent exposure to pornography, for instance, may encourage experimentation and lead to risky sexual behaviours, which can be both physically and psychologically damaging, as well as illegal.

Pornographic productions typically present exaggerated and false images of sexual relationships to the audience, leading individuals to construct unrealistic sexual expectations. This mental construct may conflict with the reality of sexual relations as they are introduced later in the stages of development and through socialisation by institutions or cultural norms, as is the case in Iran. Such contradictions may lead to the internalisation of binary divisions (e.g. normal and abnormal, healthy and deviant, homosexual and non-homosexual) as determined by society. In marital relationships, individuals may express demands based on these mental constructs in the form of sexual fantasies. However, this can result in unfulfilled needs and challenges within the relationship.

Within this cycle, society itself may label and punish what it has created through its own defective and ineffective socialisation processes (the phenomenon of the deviant mind). As knowledge is legitimised through power, binary divisions are reinforced, perpetuating this power-knowledge cycle. Therefore, it is crucial to address the impact of societal norms on sexual behaviours and to develop strategies that promote healthy sexual attitudes and behaviours.

Narratives from the research interviews suggest that childhood and adolescent abuse can repress the development of creativity and freedom during these critical stages of life, leading to feelings of exploitation and helplessness. The experience of abuse during childhood and adolescence can institutionalise a sense of powerlessness, resulting in low self-esteem and negative emotions such as humiliation and worthlessness, which become part of an individual's identity. This constructed identity can have lasting effects on an individual's subsequent life stages and relationships

with others (such as unconventional relationships or isolation) as well as their perception of the world around them. As one 49-year-old housewife stated:

I'm currently receiving treatment and counselling, and I've talked about this before, so I can tell you that I used to co-sleep with my son and daughter for several years. I know it's not something a mother should do, and I'm not trying to make excuses for myself. I don't buy into Freud's theories or any other justifications. But at the time, I had a high sex drive, and my husband wasn't around much. Since society was pretty conservative back then, I thought it was safer to satisfy my needs with my own kids instead of risking something dangerous outside the house. I slept with my son more often – maybe because he had a penis – but I also touched my daughter and even asked her to help me orgasm.

The relationship between parent and child is a deep bond based on feelings of attachment. Children view their parents as supporters and heroes in their lives, and significant parts of their lives are dependent on them. When this perception of the relationship is disrupted due to sexual abuse, children's views of their parents become distorted, and conflicting emotions arise. On the one hand, the parent is still perceived as a caregiver, while on the other hand, they are seen as a sexually abusive figure who has violated the most intimate aspect of a relationship. As a result, children may experience serious psychological damage. Fear, anger and guilt may develop in relationships based on dependency between children or adolescents and abusive parents, and they may become the 'important other' in each other's lives. The result of such relationships is dependent individuals who have 'sticky' relationships with their social and biological environments – relationships that are not based on personal maturity and identity. Consequently, independent personalities, which are a prerequisite for societal development, will not emerge, social capital will be weakened and constructive relationships based on identity independence will be absent.

It appears that, the closer the relationship between the child and the abuser, and the stronger the emotional bond between them, the longer the duration of the abuse and the more devastating the consequences for the child, because of this dependency. Suppressing adolescence with feelings

of powerlessness and incapacity, a hero mentality and a saviour complex can have destructive consequences, which will extend into the individual's life and relationship with their environment.

Sexual abuse can have a profound impact on a child's development, leading to a shift from a happy and carefree childhood to a sad and oppressed one. In addition, it can cause a child to become detached from the normal course of life, disrupting their social and cognitive development. One of the most significant consequences of child sexual abuse is the psychological fixation and arrest of the child in the same age and situation they were in when they were abused, which can have long-lasting effects on their mental health and wellbeing.

Some interview narratives suggest that sexually abused individuals experience several negative emotions simultaneously, including feelings of humiliation, ridicule, indifference from the mother and, most destructively, a sense of powerlessness and incapacity, resulting in a decrease in their self-esteem and self-confidence in later stages of life. The feeling of shame is also significant in relation to others. Shame and embarrassment arise from concerns about how they will be judged later and what reactions they may face. Fear is another significant consequence of child sexual abuse, with various reasons behind it. Major reasons include family reactions, being rejected, loss of family or support, punishment, lack of belief from others, expulsion from school and threats from the abuser. In cases where the abuser is the child's father, mother or other family member, the fear of losing them or being punished by them may prevent the child from reporting the abuse. Sometimes, children are afraid that, after reporting the violence, their families or support networks will not believe them, and, in that way, they become distrustful of these networks.

Families who lack awareness and education often employ power dynamics to deny and rationalise instances of sexual abuse. This is achieved by labelling the victim a liar or mentally ill, thus disregarding the issue at hand. The victim is ostracised and punished instead of being supported, as a result of binary categorisations and othering. In essence, families and communities leverage three common mechanisms of power, namely denial, disregard and justification, to absolve themselves of the responsibility to provide supportive environments for victims of sexual

abuse. It is essential to recognise these mechanisms and their roles in perpetuating the cycle of abuse, and to develop strategies that prioritise the empowerment and support of victims.

### *3.3.2 Premature Puberty and Emergence of High-Risk Sexual and Non-Sexual Behaviours*

Sexual abuse experienced during childhood can have profound and lasting impacts on an individual's sexual organs, feelings and thought processes, thereby inciting early puberty and ultimately leading to a proliferation of sexual relationships and addiction to sexual activities. This addiction can have significant psychological and social consequences, including the disorganisation of the personality, an inability to refuse sexual advances and a lack of sexual skills. The psychological effects of early puberty can also cause children to experience the stresses of adolescence much earlier than their peers.

Premature puberty can lead individuals to enter into relationships with peers who are not of their own age groups, exposing them to situations and behaviours that are not commensurate with their actual ages, including drug use, prostitution and risky sexual behaviours. Those who are insufficiently informed about high-risk sexual behaviours are at considerable risk of contracting sexually-transmitted infections, including HIV.

The effects of childhood sexual abuse can vary according to gender, and some consequences are gender-specific. For instance, it may create homosexual tendencies in men or a desire for multiple sexual partners in women, often with the intention of seeking revenge. Despite these differences in the effects of sexual abuse according to gender, there are commonalities in the consequences of such abuse, including the potential for long-term physical, psychological and social harm.

### *3.3.3 Physical Consequences*

In some cases, sexual abuse is accompanied by physical harm, such as injury to the sexual organs. The primary physical harms identified in this study include vaginismus, damage to sexual organs, eye injuries, loss of virginity, weakness, fatigue, bleeding, fever, headache, nausea, HIV, cervical cancer and heart palpitations. In some extreme cases, children

may lose their lives due to the severity of the physical harm caused by sexual abuse.

When a child is violated during a growth stage in body or self-awareness, it leaves a scorching mark on their psyche and soul, in addition to the physical and biological symptoms. This mark serves as a constant reminder of the trauma and torment that they have endured and carry with them throughout their life.

### *3.3.4 Behavioural Injuries*

Childhood abuse can have long-lasting, devastating effects on an individual's physical and emotional wellbeing. While the physical injuries of abuse may heal with time, the behavioural and psychological scars can last for a lifetime.

In this section, we will take a closer look at some of the behavioural injuries that can result from childhood abuse. These injuries may manifest in different ways and have significant impacts on an individual's ability to navigate relationships, trust others and live a fulfilling life.

- Child sexual abuse can lead to body dysmorphic disorder, a type of mental disorder in which a person becomes intensely preoccupied with an imaginary or minor physical defect and constantly thinks about it. This defect is usually imaginary, and if it does exist physically, the one affected sees it as significantly larger than it actually is, feels ashamed of the apparent flaw and constantly considers cosmetic surgery to correct it.
- The experience of sexual abuse also leads to the formation of distrust, misbehaviour, shame or vulnerability in the child. Children and adolescents who have been abused and assaulted interpret their social worlds based on their dominant feeling of guilt, blame or condemnation and engage in meaningless activities. This sense of guilt and shame leads to endless inner conflicts and may deprive them of logical reasoning in different life situations in the years to come, constantly playing the roles of victim and saviour and reproducing them socially.
- Learning difficulties and a lack of concentration are other common problems among abused children. They also suffer from various psychological problems such as nail-biting, anxiety, fear and depression, and believe that their support networks are not only

unsupportive, but also abusive, making it difficult for them to feel safe, concentrate and focus. This is one of the mechanisms of academic decline among abused children. Disconnection from reality and a lack of focus will have many negative effects on their social learning processes, in various areas of life.

- Anxiety is a prevalent mental health disorder among children who have experienced abuse. Childhood abuse can lead to fear, uncertainty and a lack of trust in others, which can extend to various forms of anxiety disorders.
- Another significant impact of childhood sexual abuse is the development of obsessive-compulsive behaviours and addictive tendencies. Individuals who have experienced sexual abuse may use compulsive behaviours, such as excessive cleaning or checking, to manage the stress and anxiety caused by their experiences.
- Bipolar or borderline personality disorder is also common in children who have experienced abuse. These individuals often struggle with emotional instability, impulsivity and difficulty regulating their behaviour, leading to challenges in maintaining healthy relationships and achieving personal goals.
- Childhood abuse can also lead to a reduced sense of emotional stability and behavioural imbalance, which can reduce the trust that others have in the individual and negatively impact their social relationships.
- Self-harm and drug use are two common coping mechanisms that individuals who have experienced childhood abuse may resort to in an attempt to manage the emotional pain caused by their experiences.
- In some cases, individuals may turn to substance abuse as a means of escaping the traumatic memories of their childhood abuse. These behaviours can have serious long-term consequences on the individual's physical and emotional wellbeing and should be treated appropriately.
- Self-harm and harmful behaviours towards others are prevalent among children who have experienced abuse. It is important to note that self-harm can also be harmful to others, depending on the context and situation. This is also true for sexual harassment, as an



individual who has experienced sexual abuse may exhibit harmful behaviours towards others as a form of compensation or as a coping mechanism. Such behaviours may stem from feelings of anger, hatred, jealousy and other emotions resulting from the abuse. These harmful behaviours manifest in social relationships, where the individual may engage in sadistic and harassing behaviours towards others.

- Aggression is a prevalent problem among some children who have experienced abuse. Aggression can take the form of physical or verbal behaviours, and it may have a psychological or physical impact on the victim. The intention to cause harm or injury is the primary characteristic of aggression. In sexually abused individuals, two types of actions may occur: those based on isolation, avoidance and rejection, and those based on aggressiveness and intense anger. These actions may occur independently in different situations or may occur simultaneously in the same individual. It is critical to address aggressive behaviour in individuals who have experienced abuse to promote healthy coping mechanisms and prevent further harm to themselves or others.

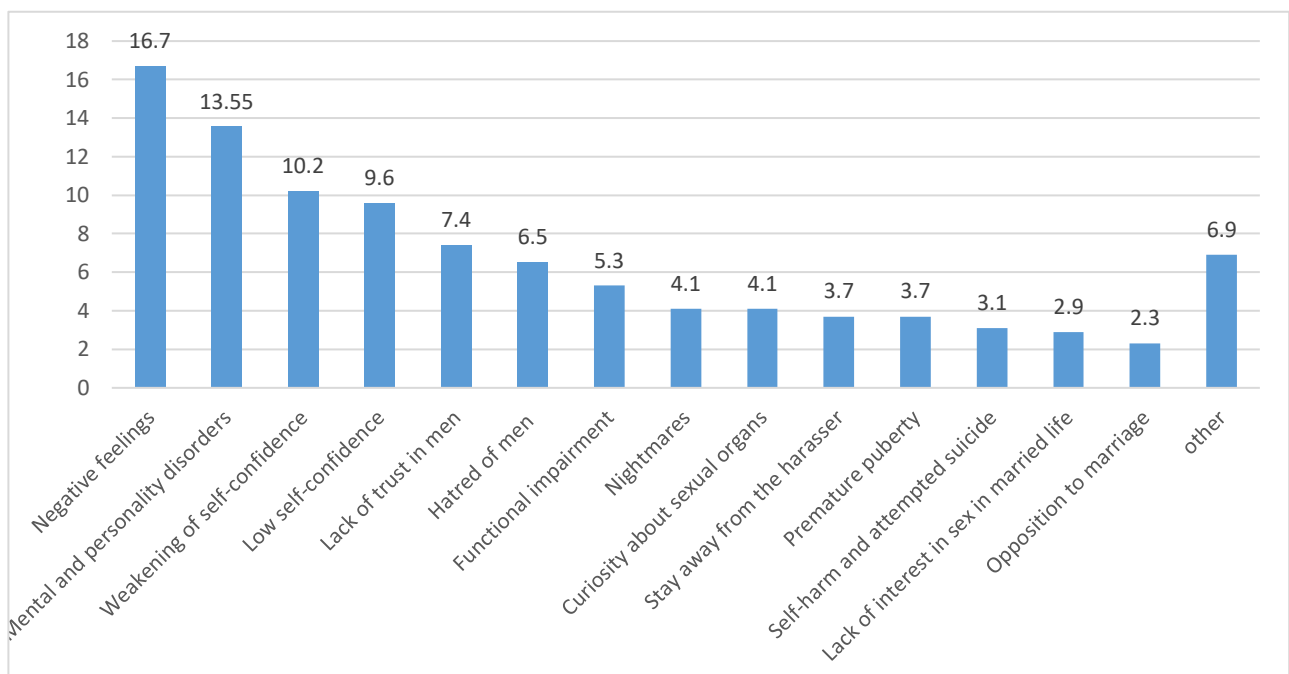


Chart 2: Psychological and behavioural changes after experiencing sexual abuse (%)

### *3.3.5 Emergence of Emotional Tensions*

Victims of childhood abuse often grapple with a multitude of painful and conflicting emotions that negatively impact their lives. Some of the most common emotional responses include feelings of self-blame and shame, hatred towards the abuser and caretakers, isolation and loneliness, fear and terror, helplessness and loss of control, and a sense of being dirty or contaminated.

Self-blame and shame are prevalent responses that can manifest in anxious or avoidant social behaviours as the victim internalises the abuse as their own fault. Feelings of hatred, disgust and vengeance are also common, directed at the abuser, the opposite sex, caretakers who failed to protect them, and even themselves. These emotions stem from a desire to reclaim power and seek justice for the trauma inflicted upon them.

Victims frequently report feeling alone, rejected and unloved, emotions that often coincide with depression. The trauma of abuse can severely damage one's sense of safety, intimacy and self-worth. Fear and terror are also commonly cited, both upon recollection of the abuse events as well as fear of others discovering the abuse. This contributes to the ongoing senses of powerlessness, a loss of control over their lives and an inability to protect themselves.

Some victims develop an irrational belief that they are somehow dirty or contaminated, which can manifest as obsessive-compulsive symptoms like excessive washing. Others may come to see their self-worth primarily in terms of their physical appearance or ability to please others, making them vulnerable to manipulative relationships. Some report feeling that they are special in some way, a distorted coping mechanism to regain a sense of power.

Confusion over one's sexual orientation or a tendency towards excessive masturbation are also frequently reported. The latter can be detrimental not only psychologically, but also to establishing healthy social relationships. At its most severe, it may lead to engaging in risky sexual behaviours and a sense of sinfulness, accompanied by a desire for forgiveness.

In summary, the trauma of childhood abuse inflicts deep wounds that permeate all aspects of the victim's emotional life, self-perception and

relationships. The emergence of these emotional tensions is an inevitable consequence of abuse that requires compassion and professional support to begin healing.

## **4. Conclusion**

The results of the survey indicate that, due to structural and functional deficiencies in Iranian social and support institutions, including the family and welfare systems, cases of child sexual abuse are exacerbated rather than addressed through coordinated policies and programmed interventions across temporal dimensions. Such inadequacies effectively pave the way for or aggravate harms and societal problems, such as incidents of girls fleeing familial homes or forced marriages. Specifically, the lack of an efficient and comprehensive framework spanning formative social agents in Iranian culture means that instances of child abuse are not mitigated; rather, they metastasise into more pervasive and intractable problems.

Children who endure sexual abuse, especially incestuous abuse from parents or close relatives, frequently develop psychological problems, internal turmoil and compromised trust that extend into adulthood and later life. They struggle with feeling safe and secure in social spaces and relationships. In addition to these intrapsychic struggles, abuse also breeds antisocial sentiments that motivate isolating and avoidant behaviours. As a result, we observe individuals lacking constructive engagement with their social worlds, diminishing key elements of society and social capital like honesty, trust, empathy and security – foundational requisites for growth across all domains of life. Simultaneously, these individuals evidence declining abilities to execute balanced and prosocial actions in their personal, working and community lives. Irreparable harm is inflicted upon relationships, responsibilities and wellbeing. Thus, the consequences of abuse proliferate, compromising not only victims' mental health, but the health of the social fabric.

Child sexual abuse perpetrated by a family member can have severe and lasting consequences for the victim. This is especially true in societies where there is little support or social policy designed to address the issue. Victims of such abuse often struggle with feelings of guilt, shame and blame, which can impact their abilities to reason logically and navigate

various situations throughout their lives. The consequences of sexual abuse can manifest in a cycle of maladaptive behaviours and affect the individual's overall wellbeing, including their biological dimensions. Individuals who have experienced sexual abuse may be less emotionally stable and balanced than others, and this can lead to unpredictable and non-transparent behaviours in social relationships. Consequently, they may experience difficulty forming and maintaining social connections and may struggle with issues of trust and empathy. This is compounded by the fact that the effects of sexual abuse can be long-lasting, leading to a dialectical relationship between psychological and social factors that exacerbate one another over time. In societies where child sexual abuse is not adequately addressed, victims may be pushed towards illegal activities and may even end up in correctional facilities. It is therefore essential that society take steps to address this issue, both in social policy and by providing support and resources to victims. Doing so can help mitigate the negative consequences of sexual abuse and promote the overall wellbeing of affected individuals.

## 5. Solutions

Identifying the biological and psychological consequences of child sexual abuse requires precise medical and psychological research. Therefore, it is necessary for specialists in this field to conduct in-depth field research.

In line with reforming, reducing and preventing the phenomenon of child sexual abuse by relatives, some suggestions have been made below that cover the macro, meso and micro levels of the issue.

- ***Cultivate comprehensive training and strategic planning*** to dismantle the foundations of patriarchal culture and eliminate barriers to equal rights and opportunities for women and children, by identifying and educating against pervasive inhumane values in patriarchal society.
- ***Advocate for political and judicial institutions***, through civic organisations, to enforce the provisions outlined in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda.
- ***Safeguard public spaces in the community*** and educate, through educational institutions, for the social and personal

awareness of children, to proactively address abuse in the home and community.

- ***Eliminate the culture of ownership and eliminate virginity as a criterion for valuing women***, so that victims of abuse are not compelled into forced marriages and child marriages due to fears of losing dignity.
- ***Review laws*** pertaining to children, and sexual abuse and violence perpetrated against them.
- ***Strengthen specialised social-work departments*** in the judiciary and establish these offices in schools and medical- and social-emergency departments in neighbourhoods, cities and villages.
- ***Establish a Children's Rights Support Council*** in the judiciary, consisting of psychologists, sociologists, behaviourists and attorneys.
- ***Train specialised attorneys*** to advocate for issues related to sexual assault in the private sphere (the family).
- ***Raise awareness in public-health institutions and related organisations*** such as the Ministry of Health, the Welfare Organisation and Social Welfare about intervention in family crises, violence and abuse.
- ***Create counselling centres*** for group therapy of victims, to prevent the consequences of abuse, as well as group therapy for abusers (if identified), to identify the causes, contexts and mechanisms of continuing abusive behaviour and to help rehabilitate them.
- ***Establish dedicated helplines*** to report abuse and sexual abuse within the family, while maintaining security principles.
- ***Develop welfare and education policies*** focused on the Iranian family, through the interaction of the Government, non-governmental organisations and support organisations, with the aim of modifying and mitigating multidimensional deprivations.
- ***Advocate for the dissemination of information*** regarding children's rights and eliminating violence and abuse from the privacy

of their homes, schools and society, by expanding the free flow of information.

- **Assist children and women** in breaking the mental barriers that force them into silence and denial.
- **Conduct neighbourhood-based education for families** to familiarise them with new cultural values and the accelerating rate of change in social norms that have caused intellectual and ideological conflicts between parents and children.
- In collaboration with institutions at the community level, **provide training** on body management, self-control, self-respect and respect for others, anger and emotion management, dealing with psychological and emotional stress, and managing severe irritability.
- **Help to increase children's self-awareness and understandings of themselves and their needs** through institutions, schools and public-service announcements and also by running neighbourhood-based street performances on this topic. The aim would be to develop personal independence and cultivate independent personalities who have been severely neglected by Iran's education system and who face many obstacles.
- **Familiarise families and citizens with their social and individual rights** through independent, transparent media, using modern knowledge to gradually reform culture and eliminate dysfunctional beliefs.
- **Develop social and cultural activities related to children** through private and non-governmental organisations.
- **Bring the pressure of civil society to bear on lawmakers and executives**, to reduce the gap between Islamic/non-Islamic laws and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Foster effective coordination between schools, the law, the medical field and the social system to **develop training programmes** for workers in these fields, with the aim of identifying and assisting abused children while maintaining confidentiality and ensuring their security.
- **Employ in kindergartens and schools experienced and knowledgeable counsellors** in psychology.

- ***Advocate for accelerating the secularisation of civil laws*** by organising campaigns and protest groups, making demands through groups of trusted community leaders and applying international pressure.
- ***Acknowledge the need to study sexual abuse*** by gender and age group (childhood and adolescence), regarding aetiology and outcomes as distinct from each other.
- ***Focus the field of study and research*** on the interrelationships between social issues and harms, including the relationships between addiction, poverty, emotional divorce, prostitution, multiple sexual relationships, theft, etc. and sexual abuse. Emphasise incest in an interdisciplinary manner, using new approaches in fields of study, with the aim of employing the resulting strategies in cultural and social policymaking for Iranian society.
- ***Provide continuous, rigorous education for children*** on how to protect themselves and when to seek help, as well as education on sexual health.
- ***Promote a culture of self-criticism*** throughout individual and social life, from childhood to adulthood, to strengthen personality foundations and resilience to the humiliation resulting from abuse.
- ***Educate parents*** about protected sexual relationships.
- ***Foster a sense of responsibility and care among parents*** of children and adolescents.
- ***Teach resistance*** to the fear of threats to dignity.
- ***Devalue male-dominated concepts*** such as shame, respect and honour.
- ***Educate about and rethink the use of ‘audacity’ and resistance*** to the abuser.
- ***Avoid blaming victims of abuse*** and ***create insecurity for abusers***, so they do not dare to abuse under the cover of the victim’s silence.

## References

- Ahmady, K. *et al.* (2016). *Echo of silence: A comprehensive research on early marriage of children in Iran*. Shirazeh Publishing.
- Ahmadi, K. *et al.* (2021). *Traces of exploitation in the world of childhood. A comprehensive research on the forms, causes and consequences of child labour*. Avaye Buf.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. (G. Colin, Ed.). Harvester Press.
- Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from Freedom*. Rinehart.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Polity Press.
- Irvanian, A. (2010). Re-traumatization of sexual victims in the context of community responses and criminal justice system. *Law Research*, 12(29), 1–24.
- Rothstein, B. (2005). *Social traps and the Problem of Trust*. Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (2013). *Principles of qualitative research method: Basic theory, procedures and methods*. (B. Mohammadi, Trans.). Research Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies.