
TABOO AND SECRECY

Incest and sexual abuse of children in Iran

Kameel Ahmady and colleauges





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Iran

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**Taboo and Secrecy
Incest and Sexual Abuse of
Children in Iran**

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Preface

The scope of laws prohibiting incest, which is one of the strongest social laws, differs from one culture to another. Throughout history, it has taken various forms, reflecting its cultural aspect and social construction rather than its natural and biological foundation. If sexual relations with relatives were naturally abhorred by humans, human societies would not have vehemently forbidden such relationships. However, what highlights the cognitive damage caused by incest is not the sexual relationship itself, but the abuse of power and authority, and the imposition of violence on powerless individuals to fulfil sexual desires, through violation of their bodily integrity and existence within the family. Considering the prevailing culture and beliefs of any society, this leads to physical and psychological consequences and deep traumas, especially during the child's developmental stage. The depth of this harm depends on the type of imposed sexual activity, the nature of family relationships and the bond between the parties involved, as well as the age and gender of the individuals.

Finding a specific definition for child sexual abuse that is relevant to the social and cultural conditions of societies and encompasses a wide range of behaviours is a difficult and often fruitless task. However, what requires concrete and practical action is creating a foundation for education, awareness, and enlightenment among children who are potentially vulnerable to abuse within their families and communities. This form of education serves as a vaccination for the well-being and future of both the child and society. Since access to potential abusers is difficult and almost impossible, general education of the community and the child is considered the most cost-effective and effective mechanism in the short term.

My main motivation and driving force for addressing issues specifically related to children and focusing on children's rights, especially any acts of violence against them, stem from my personal experience transitioning from childhood to adolescence, during which I was subjected to sexual abuse, and on the other hand, the attention to the issue of sexual abuse which arose from personal experiences and false accusations

made against me by some individuals associated with the 'Me Too' movement, based on malicious narratives, perhaps under significant duress, by a few former colleagues and friends.

The main objective of this research is to scientifically understand the issue of child abuse and sexual violence as a form of violence within the family and by relatives. This understanding aims to contribute to enlightenment and the development of effective programs and policies to mitigate the negative consequences and impacts of such abuse on society. To achieve this goal, the research examines the theoretical perspectives of various disciplines in this field and critically examines them, accompanied by field research and the collection of lived experiences of individuals involved in this issue, in order to analyse the causes and typologies. Finally, by identifying and extracting the reasons and contexts for the perpetuation and consequences of child sexual abuse, the outcome of the work has been presented in the form of a book for interested readers and audiences. This collection consists of three chapters, formulated in accordance with the logic of the theoretical framework derived from the research findings.

In the initial chapter, we embark upon an exploration of the foundations and theoretical framework surrounding child sexual violence within social institutions such as the family, schools, and other communal spaces. This comprehensive examination delves into the contexts, factors, and consequences of child sexual violence at micro, meso, and macro levels.

The second chapter delves into the lived experiences of children subjected to abuse and sexual violence within their families and communities. The culmination of this field investigation yielded significant findings, including the identification of various forms of child sexual abuse in Iranian families, the manifestations of abuse, the relationship between perpetrators and victims, the contextual conditions, intervening factors in child sexual abuse, structural and institutional ramifications, and the influence of legal frameworks and their shortcomings on the erosion of social relationships and communal assets.

The third chapter seeks to present strategies and approaches in the realm of prevention and treatment of child sexual abuse, as well as resistance against the culture of violation. These efforts are tailored specifically to the Iranian society's cultural context, while also taking into account the rights of children and human rights. The chapter culminates in the presentation of a comprehensive model derived from our own field data.

Acknowledgements

The fruits of this research endeavour blossom from the harmonious symphony of collective efforts. It is a tapestry woven by the spirited collaboration of comrades, intrepid field surveyors, inquisitive minds, and the countless contributors who offered their insights to the probing questions of this study. Moreover, it is a tribute to those who, at different junctures of this intellectual voyage, provided invaluable counsel and guidance, nurturing its growth. My heart brims with appreciation and profound gratitude for the tireless dedication of each and every individual involved. Although some respondents and associates, driven by personal or professional considerations, have chosen to remain anonymous, their hidden presence has left an indelible mark on the tapestry of this remarkable exploration.

To enumerate every single name of these remarkable contributors is an impossible feat, and to surpass the mention of a select few is an even more elusive endeavour. Thus, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all those cherished souls who selflessly shared their expert opinions, beginning with the extraordinary Shima Sattari. Their unwavering support has been the bedrock, accompanying me from the inception of this research, guiding the gathering of primary sources, orchestrating the initial field interviews, and providing invaluable insights through the iterative process.

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as adeptness in editing the field analyses and crafting eloquent references.

Let us not forget the steadfast companionship of our colleagues and intrepid field interviewers, including Shima Sattari, Sepher Ostad, and Fatemeh (Sayeh) Rahimi, whose unwavering support proved invaluable in capturing interviews both within and beyond the borders of our beloved Iran. I am humbled by their unwavering commitment and forever grateful for their indomitable spirit.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to the diverse groups and platforms that generously shared resources and pertinent information relating to the distressing topic of child sexual abuse. Due to certain political sensitivities surrounding the matter, a few collaborators opted for their names to remain undisclosed. Their collaboration has illuminated the path of awareness and deepened our understanding.

In my research, I have focused on the issue of sexual harassment, utilizing my data to replace superficial, non-expert, populist, and gendered reactions and responses with a reality-based understanding grounded in specialized knowledge. I regard this field as exceptionally complex and sensitive, believing that only through reliance on expert knowledge can one make informed comments on it.

Furthermore, I find it essential to highlight that my lived experiences, familial environment, and the geographical context in which I was born and raised have profoundly influenced my research over the years. This influence manifests both directly and indirectly in my scholarly work.

Moreover, I do not hesitate to disclose that I, too, experienced sexual harassment during my childhood. Whenever necessary, I have spoken about it with courage. I must now candidly state that my childhood experiences have undeniably influenced my choice of this research topic.

Additionally, I will share detailed accounts of my childhood experiences and many other instances in my forthcoming autobiography, set to be published this fall (2024). By sharing these experiences and their sociological analyses, I hope to

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contribute to enlightenment and foster empathy for those who have endured similar traumas.

Kameel Ahmady

May 2024

Introduction

Throughout history, the family has been considered one of the main social institutions, in its various forms, as a refuge for its members, especially children. However, within the family, unpleasant events have often been observed, the most common of which is violence against children in various forms. One of the most painful of these violences is sexual violence. Evidence related to domestic violence shows a wide range of sexual violence, indicating that violence against children is a common phenomenon in the world. Finkelhor and colleagues report that 80 to 98 percent of children worldwide have witnessed some form of domestic violence (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2009). According to UNICEF, approximately 133-257 million children annually have witnessed domestic violence within their families (Dalal, 2008). In another report, it is stated that in 2015, over one billion children aged 1 to 17 have experienced one form of physical, emotional, or sexual violence (Dalal *et al.*, 2016).

Sexual violence against children encompasses a wide range of actions, including physical contact such as sexual penetration (rape or oral sex) and non-penetrative acts such as enforced masturbation, kissing, fondling, and touching the child's body. It also includes non-contact activities such as involving children in the production or viewing of sexual images, observing sexual activities, encouraging children to engage in inappropriate sexual behaviours, and grooming children for abuse. Today, the issue of sexual violence against children, especially girls, is a significant concern in this field. Research findings indicate that children are twice as likely to be victims of violence by family members compared to strangers (Henting, 1978). It is estimated that approximately 13% of individuals who have experienced abuse were victimized during childhood and within the family environment (Stoltenborgh *et al.*, 2015).

Since the 1980s, the issue of sexual abuse has captured the interest of researchers in this field due to its widespread prevalence and far-reaching effects (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Sexual violence, whenever it occurs, attracts greater attention

compared to other forms of violence due to the severe harm it inflicts on the victim. However, when this harm takes place within the family or among close relatives, its impact becomes even more significant. This disturbing behaviour is often accompanied by silence and remains largely undisclosed. Furthermore, in the rare cases where it is brought to light, proving its credibility becomes challenging as society tends to view the family as a safe and protected environment (Zarei, 2017).

Experiencing traumatic events like sexual assault and abuse during childhood has long-lasting negative psychological and social consequences (WHO, 2016). These include issues with memory, behavioural disorders such as aggression towards sexual partners (Dube *et al.*, 2005), and depression (Chen *et al.*, 2010). A notable theory regarding child sexual exploitation suggests that individuals who have been victims of sexual abuse in their own childhood are more likely to perpetrate such abuse against their own children in the future (Glasser *et al.*, 2001). Additionally, numerous studies have indicated that being a victim of abuse during childhood is a significant factor in the perpetration of sexual violence and abuse during adolescence and adulthood (Babchishin *et al.*, 2011).

Edleson (1999) conducted a comprehensive review of over 80 studies focusing on the impact of domestic violence on children. Based on this research, Adelson identified three main categories of issues experienced by children in such situations: behavioural and emotional functioning issues, attitudinal and cognitive functioning issues, and physical functioning issues.

Margolin and Gordis (2004) conducted a study specifically examining the consequences of domestic violence on children. They classified these consequences into two categories: short-term and long-term. Short-term consequences include health-related problems, physical symptoms like sleep disturbances, cognitive and educational difficulties, emotional and mood disorders, depression and anxiety, aggression and delinquency, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress symptoms such as nightmares and excessive fear. Long-term consequences include withdrawal, feelings of mistrust and

insecurity, and an increased likelihood of the child becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence later in life.

Giddens (2008) also discusses the concept of fundamental trust, which he argues is rooted in childhood experiences and primarily influenced by good parental care. According to Giddens, the development of basic trust in a child leads to a sense of 'existential security.' However, when this trust is undermined due to exposure to violence, it can significantly impact the child's sense of existential security. In such circumstances, the child may perceive the world as an unsafe and dangerous place to live.

In Iran, there are various reasons for the lack of accurate statistics or valid evidence regarding the phenomenon of sexual violence, particularly within the family environment. These reasons include the taboo nature of sexual violence, social stigma, fear of severe punishment, and underreporting of sexual violence against children. However, the absence of valid evidence and statistics does not imply the absence of this phenomenon within families and society, as research findings indicate.

For example, research on incestuous sexual abuse suggests a prevalence rate ranging from 22% to 25% in some studies, while research on runaway girls indicates a variable rate between 12% and 36% (Maljoo, 2010: 85). Vameqi *et al.* (2007) reported a rate of 22% for high school students in Tehran facing physical violence from their parents. Researchers believe that due to fear and feelings of shame, many victims of sexual abuse do not disclose their experiences, so the existing statistics are likely lower than the actual prevalence of this phenomenon (Aspelmeier *et al.*, 2007). Although no official statistics have been published regarding cases of incest in the country, the head of the Social Harms Association stated that there have been 5,200 legal cases related to sibling incest and father-daughter relationships, excluding other forms of sexual abuse within extended family members such as uncles and stepfathers, which often go unreported (Iranian Club of Young Journalists, 2016).

Iranian society, under current circumstances, faces various issues and problems due to its organization and the challenges it confronts. One of the most significant issues is violence against children, particularly child sexual abuse. Some of the current characteristics of Iranian society include inequality, compounded poverty, social instability, patriarchal cultural norms, and the presence of an ideological government that is ineffective.

These issues have led to significant social changes over the past few decades. For example, inequality, by depriving many citizens of opportunities and resources, has contributed to child sexual abuse in various ways. The precise details of this topic are discussed in the book. Other social problems such as divorce, marginalization, and addiction have also contributed to an increased likelihood of sexual relationships within families and sexual abuse.

Although divorce itself is not a social problem, it can have social consequences, and children and women are most affected by this phenomenon. The formation of alternative family structures resulting from divorce, such as single-mother households or households where children live with stepfathers, stepmothers, or other caregivers, can create a serious risk of abuse and mistreatment. The combination of poverty and other social problems with these families has made the situation doubly critical.

Due to extreme poverty, approximately one-fourth of Iranian households live in marginalized areas and neighbourhoods. These areas are hotspots for social issues, regardless of whether we attribute these issues to the residents themselves. Deprivation of many urban facilities and services such as schools, sewage systems, inadequate housing, the presence of vulnerable spaces, residential instability, concentration of poverty, and more are characteristics of these areas. Due to the lack of development or weakened regulatory capacities in these areas, children are exposed to various forms of abuse.

If we add drug dependency to the aforementioned factors, the situation becomes even more complex. The combination of poverty, living in marginalized areas, and drug dependency is

one of the main factors contributing to child abuse. In many cases, individuals with drug use disorders easily resort to various forms of violence due to the damage to their control systems. In some instances, they may even exploit their children for sexual abuse in order to obtain funds for drugs. It is important to note that child sexual abuse is not limited to impoverished families; rather, the circumstances of abuse can vary from one case to another and can be observed among different social classes.

In a society like Iran, where women's social conditions are disadvantaged, they are subjected to various negative moral labels. It seems that society does not recognize the victim of harassment as a normal person or even a victim, but rather as a deviant and criminal, further victimizing them through stigmatization. The expulsion of the victim prevents the formation of voluntary supportive and therapeutic actions, as well as the provision of reproductive services by governmental and non-governmental organizations for the affected individuals. In a perspective that views sexual victims as morally deviant, the formation of comprehensive civil actions is unlikely, and expectations for supportive government services are also limited (Irvanian, 2010). However, the Iranian government, due to its ideological nature, is not supportive of sex education in schools and other educational systems. This is contrary to practices that exist in many countries and are recognized by international documents. Sex education not only enhances children's awareness of sexuality, methods, and self-care techniques, but also teaches them about these matters. However, due to the lack of systematic access to this education for children in Iran, and as a result, the lack of skills and awareness (especially for children in remote areas and impoverished children), they are more susceptible to abuse and violence.

The harmful effects resulting from engaging in certain sexually deviant behaviours are significant, impacting not only the individuals involved but also those associated with them and the overall moral fabric of society. For this reason, efforts are made to conceal and hide the offending behaviour as much as possible, so that there is little inclination to disclose it to others

or raise it with social and judicial institutions. This situation can be referred to as the concealment of sexual behaviour (Iravanian, 2010). Therefore, it must be said that on the one hand, there are conditions conducive to violence against children, especially sexual violence, and on the other hand, due to the lack of effective support, lack of sex education in schools and other organizations, and the social stigma associated with this phenomenon, many victims do not have the courage to report it, making it even more necessary to address this issue.

At a macro level, policy-making and the development and enactment of laws are crucial for prevention and addressing this phenomenon. Policies and laws should be based on research, knowledge, and expertise in this field in order to be effective. Social harms, including sexual violence against children, which are now widespread in society, have received less attention from policymakers and development programs in Iranian society. For example, in the Sixth National Development Program of Iran, which focused on social harms, less attention was paid to issues related to children, especially violence against children, and there has been no significant focus on children's issues in the country's overall policies.

Given the prevalence of sexual violence within the family environment and the consequences of this phenomenon, especially for children as described, it is crucial to address this issue more than ever before. Significant research has been conducted on various forms of violence and groups at risk of violence, with a particular focus on studying children, especially girls, who have directly experienced domestic sexual violence. Such studies can contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon. Therefore, the objective of this study is to address the issue of sexual violence against children in their continuous living environments, such as the family. As mentioned, these acts of violence encompass a wide range of behaviours, including physical contact, sexual assault, and coercing children into viewing sexual images. Understanding the causes, lived experiences, and consequences of this phenomenon enables policymakers and experts in this field to develop appropriate policies for prevention and proactive interventions.

Research of this kind, alongside other conducted studies, serves as a starting point for reflection, understanding, and ultimately policymaking to address sexual abuse. It is crucial for governments to take this issue seriously because sexual abuse not only violates the dignity, honour, and self-esteem of children during their childhood but also harms them throughout their lives, potentially perpetuating this cycle. Therefore, it is necessary to implement appropriate policies based on scientific findings, expert opinions, and even input from survivors of abuse. Failing to do so may result in the expansion and persistence of sexual abuse, and in some cases, the punishment of victims and survivors. However, the responsibility of preventing sexual abuse does not solely rest on governments, as they often lack sufficient capacities in this field. It is essential to educate and raise awareness within society, provide suitable platforms, especially for non-governmental organizations, to address the various aspects of this issue. Many of these organizations have firsthand experience with these abuses, the survivors, their families, and even the perpetrators. For this reason, this book aims to examine the topic of child sexual violence or child sexual abuse:

To achieve this, the following questions have been explored through qualitative research and fieldwork:

1. How does child abuse manifest in Iran in terms of social, economic, and legal factors?
2. What are the psychological and physical consequences of child sexual abuse for both the victims and society in Iran?
3. What strategies have abused children and their families devised to cope with and address this issue?
4. What prominent personality and social characteristics do perpetrators of abuse possess?

Chapter One: Understanding Sexual Violence Against Children

Introduction

Examining the literature of the problem and dedicating a chapter to it is a debated topic in qualitative research. Some, influenced by the initial statements of Glaser and Strauss (1967), believe that there is no need to review existing works in qualitative research and even emphasize that such a task should be avoided. Although the founders of the grounded theory later modified their assertions, reviewing existing works on the research topic will help the researcher by increasing their sensitivity to access critical concepts and collect information with a method and objective. This study has approached the examination of existing literature on sexual harassment and research methods in this regard with such an approach.

Since the primary goal of qualitative research is to create theoretical sensitivity in researchers to obtain information relevant to the research objective through reviewing existing works, the aim of this study is also not necessarily to provide a comprehensive definition or a theoretical framework, let alone a convincing conceptual framework for sexual violence. Instead, it simply aims to create further theoretical sensitivities within the conceptual framework that can be extracted from the provided definitions and theories.

Qualitative research does not have a commitment to a comprehensive review of the literature under study because, according to methodological recommendations, literature review in qualitative research only continues until it enhances the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher. This approach is also incorporated into the research agenda of this study.

Sexual violence, due to its various dimensions, has been the subject of study in various fields such as sociology, history, anthropology, women's and family studies, social work, psychology, law, and criminology. In other words, sexual violence has social, psychological, historical, legal, and

biological dimensions. Each of these fields has examined one of these dimensions, resulting in a diverse range of theories via which to analyse this phenomenon. Sexual violence can be perpetrated against various individuals, including women, children, and men. In this regard, there are at least two elements involved: the perpetrator or offender and the victim or survivor. Therefore, some studies and theories have focused on examining the characteristics of the offender, while others have examined the characteristics of the victim and the consequences, they face from experiencing violence.

Additionally, sexual violence takes various forms and shapes. At one end of the spectrum, there are less harmful forms such as inappropriate phone conversations, while at the other end, there is sexual assault and incest, which have much more severe consequences. In reality, different forms of sexual violence often occur together. That is why when reviewing the literature in this field, we encounter a wide range of topics.

Theoretical perspectives, like empirical literature, attempt to understand the phenomenon of sexual harassment in various dimensions, including social, psychological, biological, cultural, political, legal, and environmental. Among the theories studied in this research, some have taken a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach to this phenomenon, while others have taken a one-sided approach.

An effort has been made here to present and analyse some relevant theoretical perspectives to create more theoretical sensitivity. Their implications regarding the phenomenon under study are extracted and used as conceptual tools for the research. The literature review in this research focuses on four axes of defining sexual violence and its manifestations:

- typology of sexual violence,
- backgrounds and causes of sexual violence,
- the effects and consequences of sexual violence, and
- strategies of sexual violence.

In each case, efforts have been made to identify their implications and utilize them in the research process. A conceptual framework derived from these theoretical investigations is presented and analysed, and in the final

section of this chapter, a critique of the conducted research and empirical studies in the field of sexual violence is provided.

Definition of Sexual Violence and Its Examples

Any comprehensive definition of violence should begin with defining its various forms in a way that facilitates examination and assessment, although our goal in this book is not specifically to measure violence. In this section, we first discuss the general definition of violence and critique it. Then, with a specific approach and a focus on two vulnerable social groups, namely women and children, who are important in terms of gender and childhood aspects, we define sexual violence and violence against women. We also address child abuse and violence against children, examining some examples such as rape and incest.

Different definitions of violence have been presented. One definition state that violence is ‘any physical/bodily or psychological and mental act, harm and injury, neglect and behaviour resulting from neglect, misconduct, or abuse, including sexual abuse’ (Noori, 2008:35). Dahlberg and Krug use the World Health Organization’s definition of violence: ‘the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation’ (Dahlberg and Krug, 2002:5).

In this section, the strengths and weaknesses of the World Health Organization’s definition of violence are criticized. This definition, regardless of its consequences, focuses on the intentional nature of an act and overlooks the concept of power. The inclusion of the word ‘power’ along with the phrase ‘use of physical force’ expands the nature of a violent act and extends to actions that arise from power relationships, such as threats and intimidation. For example, an employer may use their power to coerce a female employee into a sexual relationship, and if she refuses, they may fire her or hinder her promotion.

Additionally, 'the use of violence' is not limited to overt acts of violence but also includes acts of negligence or acts of omission. This means that 'the use of force or physical power' encompasses all forms of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as self-harm and other acts of self-inflicted harm. This definition encompasses a wide range of consequences, such as psychological harm, deprivation, and inappropriate growth.

A broader understanding requires considering forms of violence that do not necessarily result in injury or death but impose a significant burden on individuals, families, communities, and healthcare systems worldwide. For example, sexual assault, although it may not result in death or injury, can have long-lasting psychological and social consequences for individuals who have experienced it and their families.

Furthermore, the term 'the use of violence' encompasses not only explicit acts of violence but also acts of negligence or indifference. It includes the use of force or physical power, disregard for all forms of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as self-abusive behaviours such as self-harm and suicide. This definition encompasses a broad range of consequences, including psychological harm, deprivation, and maldevelopment. A broader understanding requires considering forms of violence that may not necessarily result in injury or death but still impose a significant burden on individuals, families, communities, and healthcare systems worldwide. For example, while rape as a form of sexual violence may not always result in death or physical injury, its psychological and social consequences can persist for years for individuals who have experienced it and their families. Many forms of violence against women and children can lead to physical, psychological, and social problems that do not necessarily result in injury, disability, or death. These consequences can manifest immediately, become apparent years after the initial abuse, or have long-lasting effects. Since the consequences of violence are not limited to physical harm or death, considering these factors alone as the effects of violence on individuals, families, and communities would lead to neglecting the underlying causes of this phenomenon.

One of the complex dimensions defined by the World Health Organization is the concept of intentional action. Two important points should be mentioned about this concept. Even if violence is distinguished from unintentional events that result in injury, the presence of the intention to use force does not necessarily mean the intention to cause harm. In fact, there may be a significant difference between the intended behaviour and the intended outcome.

A person or perpetrator may intentionally commit an act of sexual violence, which may be defined as a dangerous act according to existing criteria, but they may not perceive it as such. For example, in many cases, individuals who commit acts of sexual violence, such as rape, have the intention to derive pleasure from the act rather than to harm the other person, and in some cases, perpetrators believe that women also enjoy this act and consent to it, and their opposition and refusal are superficial.

Another point about intentionality in distinguishing between intent to harm and intent to use violence is cultural violence. According to research in this field, violence is culturally determined. Some individuals may cause harm to others, but based on their cultural background and beliefs, they do not perceive their actions as violence. Two examples in this regard are both instances of sexual violence. In a marital relationship, sexual intercourse between a man and his wife against her will may not only be unrecognized as sexual violence in some societies but also be considered culturally and even legally legitimate and acceptable, as is mentioned in the current laws of Iran regarding consent or lack thereof by women.

The second example pertains to child marriage. Based on the beliefs of certain societies and lawmakers, child marriage is not only not considered a harmful act but is also socially and culturally accepted and legally legitimate, despite being associated with multiple harms according to existing research findings and valid definitions by international institutions, where the sexual relationship involved is defined as a form of defined assault. While this definition does not explicitly include all aspects of violence, they do exist. For example, the definition implicitly encompasses all forms of violence,

whether they occur in public or private spaces, whether they are reactive or proactive, such as instrumental and anticipatory actions in service of personal interests, whether they are criminal or non-criminal. All of these aspects are important in understanding the causes of violence and designing preventive programs.

For a better understanding of the concept of violence, it is necessary to also address violence against women, as women and girls experience this phenomenon differently. In general, violence is defined as ‘any physical, visual, verbal, or sexual act experienced by girls or women at a specific time or later, which threatens, attacks, causes harm, or takes away control over intimate relationships’ (Kelly, 1988: 41). This definition focuses on women and men as resisters who confront male power through acts of violence. Furthermore, this definition establishes the idea that sexual violence undermines women’s independence.

Violence against women - particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence - is a major public health and clinical issue and a violation of women’s human rights. This violence has its roots in gender inequalities and perpetuates them. Globally, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. Most of this violence is perpetrated by intimate partners. Any form of such violence reflects gender inequality and discrimination against women.

The United Nations defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.’ Sexual violence includes ‘any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using force, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting.’ Rape is defined as an act involving physical force or coercion, including penetration of the vagina or anus with a sexual organ or other body parts or objects (World Health Organization portal).

In the framework of such definitions of violence, the definition of child abuse would be ‘any form of physical or psychological harm, sexual abuse, exploitation, and failure to meet the basic needs of individuals under 18 years of age by others that is not accidental’ (Ludwings and Kornberg, 1982; cited in Madani Ghahfarokhi and Bayat, 2010: 277). Another definition states that violence against children includes all forms of violence committed against individuals under 18 years of age, which can be perpetrated by parents, other caregivers, peers, romantic partners, and strangers (World Health Organization portal).

Many researchers agree that children who are exposed to violence experience domestic violence when they have heard or witnessed domestic violence at home, directly experienced it, or have experienced the negative and undesirable consequences of the violence perpetrated against their caregivers (Edleson, 1999).

In this framework and based on another definition, the term ‘sexual abuse of children’ refers to the coercion or manipulation of children to engage in sexual activities, which may or may not involve violence, regardless of whether the child is aware of what is happening. These activities can include physical contact such as penetration, oral sex, and other acts that do not involve penetration, such as masturbation, kissing, fondling, and touching of sexual organs. These activities can also include non-contact activities such as involving children in viewing or producing sexual images, encouraging children to engage in inappropriate sexual activities, or grooming children for sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse can also occur online or through the use of technology to facilitate sexual harm. Sexual abuse is not limited to adult males; women and children can also perpetrate sexual abuse. Sexual abuse often occurs in combination with other forms of child abuse, such as emotional abuse, to maintain control and secrecy. There is no universally agreed-upon definition of child abuse within the family environment, but in addition to abuse by relatives such as parents, siblings, uncles, or aunts, abuse can also occur by another close person to the child, such as a step-parent, family friends, or a caregiver. Children can be subjected to sexual abuse from

birth, and long-term sexual abuse has negative effects on the emotional, social, and educational development of children and is associated with mental health issues in later stages of life.

According to the World Health Organization's definition, violence against children includes all forms of violence against individuals under the age of 18. This violence includes mistreatment of children in physical, emotional, and sexual aspects, as well as neglect by parents and other caregivers. Boys and girls are equally vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse and neglect, but girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse. As children reach adolescence, violence from peers and intimate partners increases, and mistreatment of children becomes more widespread (World Health Organization portal).

Typology of Sexual Violence

We begin the discussion on the species typology of sexual violence with the perspective of Siegel, one of the proponents who attempted to provide a typology and definition of the phenomenon of sexual violence or, in other words, rape. Initially, he draws upon the legal definition of rape. In customary law, rape is defined as 'sexual intercourse with a woman by force and against her will.' Rape is one of the most abhorrent, misunderstood, and terrifying crimes. According to traditional customary law, rape involved non-consensual sexual intercourse that a man commits against a woman with whom he is neither married nor in a cohabiting relationship.

However, there are other forms of sexual violence, such as male-on-male, female-on-female, and female-on-male rape, which are not considered in traditional definitions. In recent decades, with the recognition of changes in contemporary standards, almost every state and the federal government in the United States have revised their rape laws to no longer limit sexual violence solely to non-consensual sexual intercourse. Instead, they have defined and established various types and forms beyond that. Furthermore, governments now recognize that rape can occur between spouses and among individuals who have previously engaged in sexual relations. Regardless of

its forms, it should be noted that rape has long-term effects on the emotional and physical well-being of the victim.

In regards to sexual assault and perpetrators, Siegel believes that some assaults are planned, some are impulsive, some focus on specific victims, and others occur alongside other crimes. Some sexual offenders commit a single crime, while others are repeat offenders, and some engage in group or gang activities. Some use force against their targets, while others incapacitate their victims using drugs or alcohol. Crime analysts have attempted to define and categorize a wide range of assault situations due to the fact that there is no one type of sexual assault or offender.

A robust and scholarly classification of assault was proposed by A. Nicholas Groth, which has been utilized by Siegel. According to Groth, assault encompasses essential elements of anger, power, and coercion. Groth's classifications of assault are as follows: 1) group assault, 2) serial assault, 3) acquaintance assault, which involves individuals known to the victim such as family members and friends, assaults during the acquaintance phase (a subset of assaults during the friendship phase) that include sexual attacks, specifically during the acquaintance phase. Additionally, within this category, child or incestuous sexual acts refer to sexual acts involving a victim who has not reached the legal age, while marital rape pertains to non-consensual sexual relations between legally married individuals. Siegel defines 'child or incestuous assault' as sexual relations between a child under the legal age and an adult.

Although coercion may not be present in such acts, they are considered non-consensual from a legal standpoint due to the inability of individuals under the legal age to provide informed consent. 4) assault among friends, 5) assault on campus, 6) deceptive assault: deceptive assault occurs when the offender employs deceit and trickery to persuade the victim to engage in sexual activity or to present themselves as someone else (identity fraud) with whom the victim had an intimate relationship, 7) sexual harassment in alleyways and backstreets (Siegel, 2015).

Brown has used the concept of a spectrum in categorizing different types of violence. To illustrate the integration of sexual violence, he has used colour analogies, as they should not be seen as independent dimensions or distinct categories. They are distinct from each other but have significant overlap. The overall continuum of sexual violence, which is a combination of various forms of violence, somewhat expresses this idea:

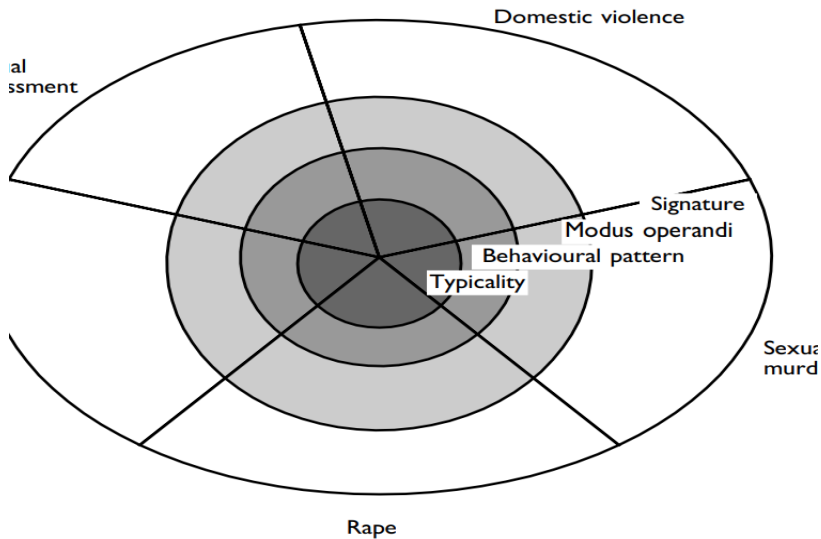
Forms of violence	%	
Threats of violence	100	
Sexual harassment	93	↓ Core behaviours of sexual violence
Coercion for sexual relations	83	
Sexual assault	70	
Obscene phone calls	68	↓ Behaviour patterns associated with different classes of sexual violence
Coerced sex	63	
Domestic violence	58	
Sexual abuse	50	
Flashing	50	
Rape	50	
Incest	22	

Table 1 Reconceptualizing Kelly’s violence continuum of violence (adapted from Brown, 2011: 171)

From Brown’s perspective, Youngs’ theory on differentiating between types of crimes can also be beneficial for summarizing the discussion. Youngs effectively distinguished between financial crimes and crimes committed against individuals. In a specific crime such as assault, behaviour can generally be categorized into specific escalating actions that revolve around

several key issues. Below is a model that illustrates classifications within sexual violence.

Figure 1 Prevalence Rates of General Sexual Violence (adapted from Brown, 2011: 171)



This model assumes that in each subcategory of sexual violence, there are commonly observed behaviours. After that, behaviours that decrease in frequency begin to separate, indicating distinct behavioural patterns related to different types of sexual violence. Then, behaviours that occur less frequently establish a relationship with specific offenders who commit particular crimes. At this level, different types of offenders can be identified and distinguished, such as opportunistic rapists who target strangers or sexual control killers. Finally, behaviours with lower frequency are identified with specific offenders due to their unique behaviours, such as individuals who commit murders using specific methods. The diagram below illustrates the status of subcategories of sexual violence. It is expected that closely related subcategories will have more common behaviours, which also hold true for the behavioural overlaps in the context of sexual violence and its types reported by individuals. There are overlapping behaviours observed in more than one subcategory of sexual

violence. Additionally, some behaviours exhibited by an offender in different social settings may be influenced by each other. For example, the terrifying aspects of sexual harassment in the workplace may be influenced by the intimidation of domestic violence experienced at home, which can lead to sexual assault. The potential intensification and intersection between different types of sexual violence are depicted in the diagram below.

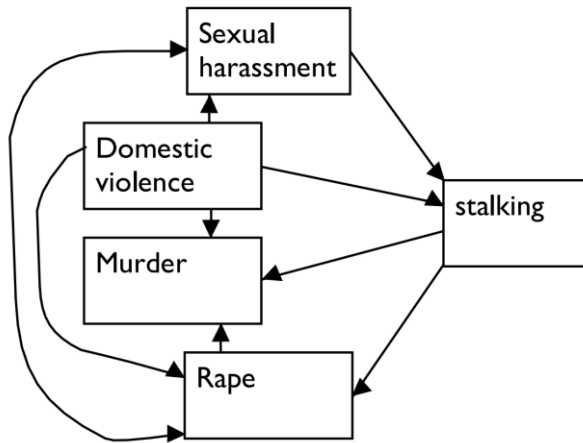


Figure 2 Potential Intersection between Subcategories of Sexual Violence (adapted from Brown, 2011: 172)

Therefore, sexual harassment or domestic violence can lead to surveillance, and surveillance itself can lead to murder, rape, and domestic violence. Additionally, some behaviours may occur across multiple social classes. For example, inappropriate phone calls exist in surveillance, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Theft of certain items can occur in rape, murder, or surveillance. Humiliating an individual by exposing them to others can occur in sexual harassment or domestic violence. In Iranian culture, it is expected that lower social classes will exhibit more harassing behaviours compared to those further from the cycle.

Behaviours that occur simultaneously and have a meaningful relationship with each other also have differences. For example, a criminal may start with sexual harassment and then move on to surveillance, ultimately ending in rape and murder.

It is also possible for individuals to engage in only one type of sexual violence, but in many cases, there is a close relationship between different types of sexual violence (Brown, 2011: 73-156).

Based on who commits the violence, three types of violence can be identified (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002;7):

1. *Self-directed violence*: This type of violence includes suicide and self-harm.
2. *Interpersonal violence*: This type of violence is divided into two categories: violence by family members and violence by intimate partners. While these forms of violence often occur within the family environment, they are not limited exclusively to it. Examples of interpersonal violence often include child abuse, domestic violence, violence between intimate partners, and the more severe form of incestuous rape.
3. *Collective violence*: This type of violence often occurs among unfamiliar individuals and individuals who often do not know each other. This form of violence often occurs outside the home and is divided into three categories: social, political, and economic violence. In the context of social violence, one can refer to group sexual assaults by some terrorist organizations. Examples of violence in society often include sexual assault or attacks by strangers and violence in institutional settings such as schools, workplaces, prisons, and the like. The initial classification distinguishes between violence against oneself, violence perpetrated by a small individual or group, and violence perpetrated by larger groups such as a political organization or a terrorist group. Each of these three categories is further divided to indicate specific types of violence.

Violence can be categorized into four elements: physical, psychological, sexual, and deprivation or neglect. The figure below illustrates the combination of forms of violence in terms of perpetrators and the nature of violence, with the horizontal arrangement indicating who has been affected and the vertical arrangement indicating the impact of the violence.

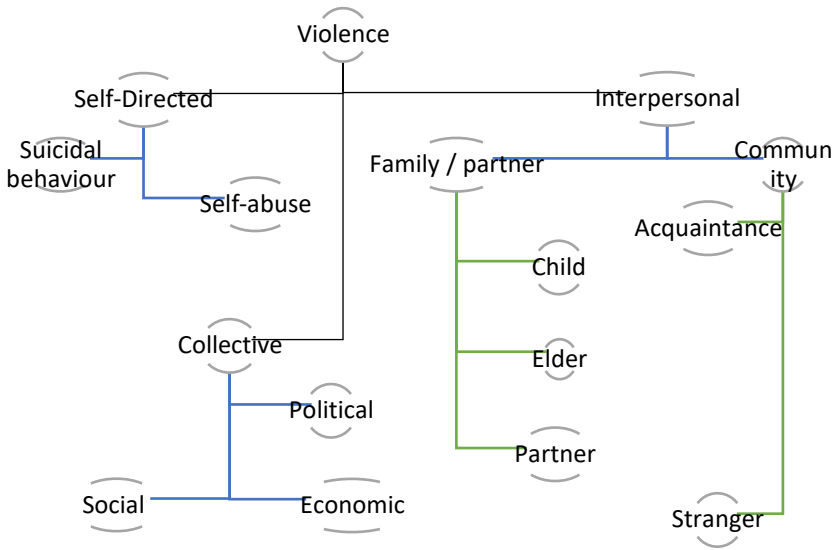


Figure 3 Dahlberg and Kraug’s typology of violence

These are the four types of violence, each occurring within broader categories and their subsets, which were explained above, except for self-directed violence. For example, violence against children that occurs at home can include physical, psychological, sexual, and neglectful abuse. Violence in society can involve physical assault among youth, sexual violence in the workplace, and neglect of elderly individuals in long-term care facilities. Political violence can encompass instances such as sexual assault in conflicts and physical and psychological warfare (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002; 7-4).

In its definition, violence against women refers to various forms of violence that have been experienced by individuals who have experienced sexual violence and are defined as violence. However, some of these cases are not included in national legal statutes or in the classifications commonly used by researchers:

1. Threat of violence
2. Sexual harassment
3. Pressure for sexual relations
4. Unwanted phone calls
5. Forced sexual intercourse

6. Domestic violence
7. Winking
8. Rape
9. Incest (sexual relations with relatives).

He indicates that these forms of violence do not have precise boundaries and have significant overlap with each other, to the extent that there is no precise and specific analytical categorization in this area that connects different experiences of sexual violence. Furthermore, the progression of sexual violence is not linear and ascending; instead, it considers it as a quantum. It argues that there are three fundamental dimensions: physical or sexual violence, violence can involve one or more incidents, and the victim can be subjected to violence by known or unknown individuals.

Type of Violence	Description	Comment
Sexual harassment	Creation of a hostile workplace that is sexualised in such a way that the general experience of working there is offensive, or where a situation where a person of power implicitly or explicitly creates a situation in which a fellow worker must engage in or endure sexualised behaviour to retain their job status, make career progress or prevent a loss of status (Bowers and O'Donohue 2010)	Approximately 25% of working populations estimated to have experienced sexual harassment, with women more likely to perceive harassment, discrimination and negative health outcomes in terms of gender than men (Marsh <i>et al.</i> 2009)
Domestic Violence	Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality (Home Office 2005).	Intimate partner violence accounts for 25% of all violent crime in the UK and lifetime prevalence estimates suggest 45% of women and 26% of men experience at least one such episode (Gilchrist and Kebbell 2010)

Stalking	An intentional pattern of unwanted behaviours over time towards a person or persons that result in their experiencing fear, or behaviours that a reasonable person would view as fearful or threatening (Häkkinen-Nyholm 2010).	Estimates vary depending on definitions (lifetime prevalence range between 3–13% for males and 8–32% for females with average duration of two years) (Häkkinen-Nyholm 2010)
Rape	Intentional penetration of vagina, anus or mouth with a penis without consent (Sexual Offences Act 2003)	Large rate of under-reporting (13,093 cases in 2008); lifetime prevalence of rape or attempted rape for those over 16 (and under 59) was 1 in 24 women and 1 in 200 men (Stern Review 2010)
Sexual murder	Murder with an apparent or admitted sexual motivation (Oliver <i>et al.</i> 2007)	Difficult to assess numbers because typically, if murder committed, albeit with a sexual motive, the offender is charged only with the murder (Milsom <i>et al.</i> 2003)

Table 2 Different Definitions of Various Forms of Sexual Violence
(Source: Brown, 2011: 3-162)

It is clear that there is an overlap between sexual harassment and assault, between assault and domestic violence, and also between sexual assault and homicide. Theft from the victim in cases of homicide, assault, and sexual assault, the use of uncontrollable violence, and the use of weapons are all characteristics of sexual assault and homicide.

Some observers differentiate sexual harassment from sexual behaviour, meaning something that is experienced due to a person’s gender, such as bullying. Sexual harassment can also involve sexual threats, such as offering a job promotion if the employee responds positively to the employer’s request or

threatening dismissal if the employee does not comply with the employer's request (Brown, 2011: 63-157). Finally, it should be noted that the definitions provided for violence and sexual harassment are not without issues, and there are differences between legal and research classifications and what is meaningful for victims.

Grounds and Factors for Sexual Violence

In discussions regarding the domains and contributors of sexual violence, scholars have adopted diverse viewpoints that consider various aspects and degrees of analysis. Some researchers have taken a holistic approach, scrutinizing the various spheres and elements of sexual violence at a macro and structural level. This includes examining biological, physical environmental, economic, cultural, social, and legal-political factors and their respective indicators and components. On the other hand, some academics have concentrated their attention on an intermediate level, investigating the inner workings of violent behaviour within social establishments such as families, schools, peer groups, and other organizations. By doing so, they aim to uncover and elucidate the underlying reasons and circumstances of sexual violence at this particular level. Certain individuals have chosen to focus on a micro and individual level, delving into the factors and antecedents of sexual violence through personal experiences, cognitive attributes, or other individualistic characteristics.

In this section, we will provide a concise overview of the perspectives and hypotheses presented at each level—macro and structural, institutional and intermediate, and micro and individual. We will also identify the most critical variables and contexts related to sexual violence from these different viewpoints.

Macro and Structural Level

Physical-environmental causes and factors

The environment and physical factors have an influential role in the formation of sexual violence. Lack of place management, the home as a site of violence occurrence, lack of protection for

victims, and the child's immediate environment are among the physical and environmental conditions that have been mentioned in some published works on sexual violence.

Poor management of spaces

The poor management of spaces is a significant contributing factor to crime and disorder. Managers of social spaces have the responsibility of regulating the functioning of a space and addressing situations that can potentially lead to criminal activity. However, when management is inadequate or ineffective, it can inadvertently contribute to an increase in crime and disorder. This includes spaces such as stores, public areas, schools, and other locations where managers, such as employees, security guards, or teachers, have a role in maintaining order and security. The actions and decisions of these managers can have a significant impact on the level of crime and disorder within a space.

Home as a site of violence

Usually, fear of assault exists outside the home, but data shows that most incidents of sexual violence occur within the home, involving either the victim or the perpetrator. On the other hand, while abduction by a stranger paves the way for sexual assault and occurs under the influence of the physical environment, other factors indicate that the social environment within a community is more determining and significant than the physical environment. For example, in a social environment deeply rooted in the belief in male dominance and entitlement to sexual relations, there is a higher likelihood of sexual violence. Factors such as societal tolerance of sexual violence and the extent of power in punishing offenders also play important and determining roles (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002).

Helplessness and lack of protection for victims

Turning victims into suitable and easily accessible targets for perpetrators can make a person a desired subject in this context. The presence of certain characteristics in individuals and things (such as places, properties, etc.) turns them into potential targets for crimes. The absence of capable guardians

is one of these conditions. A capable guardian is someone who can protect the target. According to Felson (2008: 70), 'A guardian is not always a police officer or a watchman. Typically, a guardian is anyone whose presence or proximity can deter crime. Most people take care of their belongings even if they do so unconsciously.' A guardian is someone to whom the offender is emotionally or legally attached, thus being in a position to divert or prevent the offender's criminal behaviour. A caretaker who exercises control through emotional attachment (informal social control) can be parents, neighbours, etc., while caretakers who exercise control through legal dependency (formal social control) can be the police or a judge.

Offenders are more likely to commit a crime when guardians are absent. A guardian protects the target. When a guardian is present, the likelihood of an issue arising is significantly reduced. Guardians are often friends who protect their friends, individuals who protect their properties and families, hired security personnel, and, of course, the police (Ek, 2003). Ek (2003) also discusses controllers. According to him, controllers are more important than issues. Issues arise precisely when offenders and targets come together in the absence or inability of controllers. The occurrence of issues is attributed to the absence of controllers, which is the most important characteristic of this explanation, as offenders and targets often gather together without encountering any problems.

Initial environment of the child

Every individual is born into a tangible social structure and experiences encounters with important and influential individuals who are responsible for their social upbringing. These influential figures impose themselves upon the individual. Their perceptions and definitions of the individual's situation become objective realities for them. The influential individuals who stand between the individual and the world modify and shape that world through their mediation. Based on their position in the social structure and their personal characteristics arising from their life history,

they select certain aspects of that world. The child, through various emotional means, identifies and feels a sense of conformity and unity with the significant people around them. They internalize the roles, mental dispositions, and moral tendencies of these influential figures, in other words, they make them a part of themselves. Through this alignment with others who hold significance, the child becomes able to recognize their own identity and achieve a coherent and justified sense of self mentally.

This process is not one-sided or mechanistic, but rather it involves a dialectic between the essence attributed to the individual by others and the essence the individual attributes to themselves. It exists in every moment the individual perceives themselves as being identical to their influential figures and mentors. The mental assimilation of identity and the mental assimilation of the social world are simply different aspects of the process of internalization, mediated by the same influential figures and mentors.

There is evidence to suggest that sexually violent behaviour among men is learned, especially among children who have experienced sexual abuse. Studies on sexually abused children indicate that one in five later becomes a perpetrator of child abuse. Environments that are physically harsh and emotionally devoid of support, characterized by competition for scarce resources, are associated with sexual violence. For example, sexually aggressive behaviour among men who have witnessed violence in their families is emotionally distant from their fathers, and their fathers have been less attentive to them. Additionally, men who come from patriarchal family structures are more likely to engage in various forms of sexual violence (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002).

Biological and Environmental Factors

Pathological theories are among the clinical approaches to understanding the perpetration of sexual violence. There are three sets of interrelated dynamic factors associated with the commission of sexual crimes. These three sets include genetic factors such as inherited genetic traits and brain development, environmental factors such as social, cultural, and individual

background characteristics, and neuro-psychological factors. Genetic predispositions and social learning influence brain development and three neuro-psychological systems: motivations and emotions, perception and memory, and action selection and control. These intertwined factors contribute to clinical issues for offenders in terms of deviant arousal, crime-related thoughts, sexual fantasies, social problems, and emotional regulation. Subsequently, sexual offending behaviour serves to maintain a cycle of positive reinforcement, reducing the offender's anxiety and serving the preservation and even intensification of deviant acts.

One important biopsychosocial approach to sexual violence is the evolutionary theory. This theory provides a biological explanation for rape based on Thornhill and Palmer's rape theory. Supporters of this theory claim that men who can impose their sexual desires on women through force can have greater reproductive success and, as a result, pass on their traits to more offspring. Thornhill and Palmer refute theories that emphasize the role of culture and learning in acquiring predispositions for rape, accepting culture only in terms of humans having evolutionary capacities that allow them to learn these traits (Siegert & Ward 2002: 6).

Thornhill and Palmer proposed that rape might have evolved as part of a reproductive strategy. They suggested that it could provide a means for men to interact with potential mates cautiously or selectively before making a definitive choice. However, this controversial hypothesis requires careful examination and should not be interpreted as justifying or excusing sexual violence. They argue that this evolutionary trait has persisted over time because it ensures the survival of the human species. They claim that rape can be explained solely in the context of mate choice and male-female compatibility issues during the Pleistocene period (the fourth geological era). Rape effectively limits or interferes with women's reproductive strategies. This theory does not seem to provide a satisfactory explanation for rape. In contrast, Sigad argues that offenders are a highly heterogeneous population, and their motivations are distinct subjects that manifest

through various clusters of psychological characteristics (Sigad, 2002: 162).

Age is a biological factor that influences sexual violence. Young women are usually at a higher risk of experiencing sexual assault compared to older women. According to some recorded data, between one-third and two-thirds of all sexual attacks occur against individuals who are 15 years old or younger. Some forms of sexual violence are associated with a young age, such as sexual violence that occurs in schools or is perpetrated by peers, or the trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation. It could be said that this category of women may have less ability to resist violence and are more vulnerable to it, thus making it easier for perpetrators to commit violence against them (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

Economic Context and Factors

Resource dilution in families and economic pressure

The theory of resource dilution encompasses two divergent paths. On one hand, if the level of 'constant' violence or abuse is considered, in this case, the probability of violence against the child should decrease with an increase in the number of playmates (family members such as siblings) (the controlling function of family members).

On the contrary, an increase in the number of children in a family often leads to a strain on resources, particularly material resources and parental comfort. This strain can potentially heighten the likelihood of violence as the number of playmates (children) increases. The scarcity of parental tranquillity and material resources can contribute to a rise in the risk of abuse with a growing number of children in the household. Families with younger children may face a reduced capacity to cope compared to those with older children.

Conversely, there is a theory that suggests that the risk of violence could decrease with more playmates at home, possibly due to a dilution effect. This perspective implies that a higher number of children could serve as a protective factor against violence, minimizing the opportunities for such incidents to

occur. However, it is also plausible that an increased presence of children in the household might create more opportunities for violence to manifest. It is important to note that violence, particularly physical violence, may occur even in the presence of all family members.

Furthermore, when children assess parental comfort and available resources, the probability of violence may rise in correlation with the number of playmates. This tendency towards increased violence could be more pronounced in cases of physical aggression. In this context, the analysis suggests that physical violence may be influenced by the evaluation of resources, especially the material resources of parents. Consequently, a higher number of playmates could heighten the likelihood of such violence occurring (Aliverdina *et al.*, 2011).

Family Dimension

According to some researchers, there is a direct relationship between violence and the number of children. In this regard, Malik (2010) believes that as the number of children increases, parents, especially mothers, may feel overwhelmed and frustrated because they become less capable of managing and controlling their children. This can lead them to resort to violence to exert control over their children.

Zuravin (1991) points out three reasons why the family dimension can lead to violence against children: Firstly, a large number of children (family dimension) can result from unintended pregnancies. Children born from unintended pregnancies, as their parents did not have the desire or plan for their arrival, may be more susceptible to experiencing violence. Secondly, studies, especially in the field of sociology, have shown that high-density families, with increased parental pressure and stress, neglect or pay less attention to the needs of their children, have an authoritarian and undesirable relationship between parents and children, and rely heavily on violence as a parenting style. Thirdly, research has demonstrated that single-parent families and high-density families, due to lower income and limited material resources, are less responsive to the needs of their children.

Poverty - social exclusion

It is better to use the concept of social exclusion instead of poverty, which refers to long-term deprivation resulting in being disconnected from the mainstream of society. Social exclusion is a multidimensional concept. While poverty refers to economic deficiencies, social exclusion is used to understand and measure individuals' relationship with different domains of society. Social exclusion is defined and identified based on components such as participation, citizenship rights, access to opportunities, power, and weak social networks. Social exclusion provides a better and broader insight into social issues and is a more suitable concept for describing severe deprivation of an individual or a group than poverty.

Strategies and policies to address social exclusion and poverty differ. Therefore, social exclusion is a more appropriate concept for describing severe deprivation of an individual or a group than poverty. Social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon that goes beyond material dimensions and economic deficiencies, encompassing a range of social, cultural, and political deprivations. The concept of social exclusion goes beyond the economic aspects of deprivation, such as lack of tools and material resources, and the absence of access to goods and public services such as education, healthcare, and housing. It covers a range of social issues such as social participation, citizenship rights, social connections and relationships with family, friends, and local community groups, security, gender, and participation in local and national decision-making processes, as well as equal opportunities (Firoozabadi, 2013: 26-32).

Women and girls living in poverty may experience higher rates of sexual violence during their daily activities, such as when returning home alone at night or working in fields. Children of poor women may receive less parental supervision when they are not in school because their parents may be working and unable to care for them. These children themselves may be forced into work and are therefore more likely to be subjected to sexual violence. The experience of violence is influenced by child labour. Poverty forces many girls and women to work in

occupations that carry a high risk of sexual violence, especially prostitution. Poverty also puts immense pressure on them to find and maintain employment, engage in business activities, and achieve good grades if they are studying, making them more vulnerable to sexual coercion by those promising these things. Poor women are also more exposed to sexual violence by their partners.

Deprivation

Deprivation is related to both perpetrating sexual violence and being a 'victim of sexual violence.' Researchers in this field argue that the link between deprivation and the perpetration of sexual violence is mediated by the crisis of masculine identity. In many societies, models of desirable masculinity are presented, but for lower-class individuals and those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods where legitimate opportunities such as suitable jobs are not available, they are unable to attain desirable masculine patterns. Therefore, they attempt to pursue alternative paths and engage in various actions such as drug abuse and committing sexual assault (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

There is a likelihood of feeling alienated from one's own society: The reasons and methods of ostracism can vary greatly among local communities, but those who are at a higher risk of being ostracized are individuals who have limited opportunities for financial advancement and those who violate the prevailing ideologies or moral codes of a local community. The more norms an individual or group violate, the higher the likelihood of ostracism. These outcasts are more vulnerable to experiencing sexual harassment (Firoozabadi, 2013: 77-78).

Perhaps it is not unreasonable to consider cultural backgrounds and factors as the most important foundation and influential factor in human behaviour. Although materialists have criticized this perspective, it is widely accepted by idealists, especially those referred to as cultural determinists, with Talcott Parsons being the most famous among them within the field of sociology. Sexual violence is no exception to this rule. Culture has had a significant impact on this phenomenon in various forms. However, based on the studies

conducted in this research, three cultural factors have received more attention from proponents: male dominance, a violence-prone society, and the notion of privacy within the family. The following sections will provide an explanation of each factor.

Male dominance

Sexual violence committed by men has its roots in the ideologies men hold regarding entitlement to sexual relationships. These belief systems provide women with very limited options to reject sexual requests from men. Consequently, many men refuse to accept the possibility that their sexual advances may be rejected by women or that women have the right to choose to engage in sexual relationships. In many countries, both women and men perceive marriage as an obligation for women in relation to unrestricted sexual activity, although there may be cultural restrictions on sexual intercourse during certain periods, such as after childbirth or during menstruation.

Sexual norms surrounding the use of violence as a means to achieve goals are strongly correlated with sexual assault. In societies where male dominance ideologies prevail (physical dominance and male honour and dignity), sexual assault is more common. In countries with a culture of violence or witnessing conflicts, almost all forms of violence, including sexual violence, are prevalent (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002). Feminists argue that sexual assault is just one manifestation of a larger problem in society referred to as male dominance. Feminist theorists view sexual assault as more than a sexually violent act and claim that it is motivated by political aspirations for dominance and humiliation. Feminist theorists see sexual assault as stemming from political motives of dominance and humiliation, going beyond its mere violent nature. They dispute the notion that sexual assault is solely about individual actions, contending that it is shaped by societal norms regarding gender roles and identities. For example, men who commit sexual assault may claim that 'women are inherently different from men, and men cannot easily understand these differences,' and this belief 'serves as an obstacle to understanding the complex and realistic beliefs and desires of

women' and also indicates that these men may feel that sexual relationships are a competitive game between two opposing individuals with incompatible needs.

Since most men believe that women are inherently different, it is easier for them to harm women. Furthermore, proponents of the entitlement theory assume that men believe they deserve sexual gratification from women if they request it. Studies show that the likelihood of sexual assault is higher in men who attribute certain beliefs, capacities, and desires to women, such as the belief that women are inherently seductive or constantly seeking sexual relationships with men. Some men hold the belief that women always accept sexual relationships and that they exist solely to fulfil men's sexual needs. These men consider women to be created solely for the purpose of fulfilling men's sexual needs and view women's most important needs and desires within the realm of sexuality. Men with this belief tend to perceive women's behaviour as sexual, even when it is not (Siegert & Ward, 2002: 11).

Furthermore, some men believe that women's actions and needs are often contradictory. They think that women are unaware of the messages their bodies convey. They believe that women even enjoy it when they are forced into an unwanted relationship - a violation - and that 'in general, violation is a misinterpretation of sexual signals.' This notion leads men to believe that violating women is acceptable, even when they outwardly claim they do not desire such a relationship; subconsciously, they seek it because they derive pleasure from it.

Most of the men who view women as sexual objects and believe that women are inherently inferior to men are more likely to commit violations. Men who hold these beliefs think that they have the right to control and determine women's sexuality, deciding what women truly want. These men also believe they have the right to shape and decide what sexual and non-sexual behaviours of women are acceptable or unacceptable. Therefore, women are expected to fulfil men's demanded needs. Men believe they have the right to impose their desires on women and, as a result, they believe they have the right to

engage in relationships with women against their inner desires or even violate them.

The findings of Martin and others support the claim made by feminists that violations are merely a manifestation of men's dominance over society. Their studies have shown that in regions with higher gender inequality, the rate of violations against women is also higher. Their findings indicate that the reverse actions taken for gender equality have had opposite results because men perceive women as a threat to their possessions, economic status, and social position (Martin *et al.*, 2006).

In societies where gender inequality is a structural characteristic, 'men have social, political, and economic dominance over women, and women are merely perceived as sexual beings who should cater to the needs of men.' In this structure, parents, especially fathers, have legitimate power over their children, and children, especially girls, do not have an independent identity. They derive their existence and identity from others, including their father and husband. In such circumstances, children are considered the property and belongings of their fathers.

In this unequal structure, 'the prohibition of a father's retribution for intentionally killing his children and the perception of child murder as discipline and punishment is considered non-intentional killing, which has occurred due to the father's excessive punishment beyond the limits of appropriate and beneficial discipline for the child's well-being. Therefore, it is deemed acceptable and permissible.' Consequently, due to the absolute dominance of the father over the children and the absence of a specific monitoring system capable of monitoring father-child relationships at the societal level, and beyond that, the perception of non-interference by the power system in private and domestic matters, the practical possibility of engaging in sexual relationships with relatives (incest) arises (Maljoo, 2010: 91).

Another factor influencing social relationships and family reactions to sexual violence is the blame placed on women without holding men accountable. Instead, the focus is on the

loss of honour and family dignity. Such a response creates an environment where sexual assault can occur without punishment.

In these families, there is little pressure to control their young sons, encouraging them to recognize that forced sexual relationships are wrong. However, there is increased pressure on daughters to prevent them from engaging in sexual relationships or being in environments where they may be subjected to assault or abuse. Regarding child marriage, while deprivation is one of the main driving factors, other factors such as preserving girls' chastity, protecting them from early extramarital sexual relationships, and preventing HIV/AIDS are common justifications given by families for such marriages (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

Violent socialization

Based on some theoretical approaches, incomplete socialization accompanied by disruption in the physical, psychological, and social functions of children has a negative impact. Dysfunctional and negative parental behaviours can be identified and categorized as follows: lack of coordination between parents, meaning when one of them responds to the child's behaviour negatively (negative reinforcement) and the other responds positively (positive reinforcement). Lack of coordination or inconsistency can occur from one parent's side only, meaning that one of them gives a positive response to the child's behaviour at a certain time and a negative response at another time.

Researchers in this field have tried to explain these incompatible behaviours and lack of coordination between children and parents. They have paid attention to factors such as family and parental poverty and social isolation, social support, and other economic and social factors. In this context, Waller [10] mentions that the lack of support for isolated mothers within society leads to inappropriate interactions and even parenting styles between parents and children. The absence of warm and positive social relationships, receiving social support (perceived and received) from mothers, and her interaction patterns with children are affected. Therefore,

parents, especially mothers, exhibit inconsistent and incompatible behaviours when they have inappropriate relationships with others within society, are not supported, and sometimes have violent relationships with other members. Additionally, parents who have exhibited conflicting and abusive behaviours towards other individuals in society, especially adults, indicate issues such as the loss of social and economic privileges and emotional suffering. In this regard, Raymond mentions family and marital conflicts. In his view, positive relationships such as cooperation, guiding relationships, harmony, and marital support can play a significant role in preventing violence, especially violence against children. On the other hand, behaviours such as negative relationships, negative criticism of each other, and marital incompatibility can play a significant role in sexual violence and violence against children.

Research has shown that in families where there is incompatibility or conflict between husband and wife, and there is aggression between them, they use violent and aggressive behaviours, and even physical punishment in raising their children (Aliverdinia *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the intergenerational transmission of conflicts [15]: Family violence, especially against women and children, can be transmitted from one generation to the next. In this regard, empirical evidence has confirmed this assumption, such as the use of violence as a means of parenting as a norm in some families (Collins, 1992).

One of the theories that can explain the issue of violence, especially at the family level, is the social learning theory. According to this theory, violent behaviours are learned through the observation of violence. The more this learning is encouraged, the more it is effective in reinforcing violent behaviours in the future. In this context, researchers have mentioned the following stages for learning violence, especially at the family level: The first stage is a stage where an individual learns that individuals who love each other, such as husband and wife or other family members who have a close relationship, use violent behaviours towards each other. In the next stage, there is no moral prohibition on the use of violence.

In these conditions, external or internal constraints do not prevent individuals from engaging in violent acts. Ultimately, in these conditions, if family members have not learned other ways to solve their problems, they will resort to violence to solve their issues (Ezazi, 2001: 61).

In the same context, Albert Bandura, a social psychologist, believes that a significant portion of learning occurs through interaction and observation of others' behaviours. An important point in this perspective is the lack of need for reinforcement and the use of learned behaviour in the moment. In other words, a person learns a behaviour, but that behaviour will not occur or be expressed until there is a need for it or, in other words, reinforcing factors are absent. Additionally, the more the observation of these behaviours increases and they have more acceptance among others, the higher the likelihood of learning them.

At the family level, parents, especially fathers, have significant influence on children. When parents resort to violence and aggression in their interactions and when facing problems, children align themselves with their parents and learn their behaviours. As these children grow up, they tend to use violence in raising their own children, based on the learned behaviour. According to Bandura, children learn violence and its manifestations by observing their parents' behaviour and emulating them. They replicate this behaviour against others in their own families, regardless of whether it is a father-led or future family (Nabavi *et al.*, 2013).

In families, when parents utilize physical violence as a form of disciplinary measure, especially when they face difficulties or are upset and angry, their violence becomes a model for other family members, including their children. In such circumstances, children learn violent behaviours and apply them against other family members, such as younger siblings, or even more extensively, against others outside the family. They perceive the use of violent methods like hitting, attacking, using force, and even tools as permissible under certain circumstances.

There is evidence to suggest that sexually violent behaviour among men is learned, particularly among children who have experienced sexual abuse. Studies on children who have been sexually abused indicate that one in five of them later become perpetrators of child abuse. Environments that are physically harsh and lack emotional support, characterized by competition for scarce resources, are associated with sexual violence. For instance, sexually aggressive behaviour is more prevalent among men who have witnessed violence in their families and had emotional distance from their fathers, with their fathers being less attentive to them. Moreover, men who come from patriarchal family structures are more likely to engage in various forms of sexual violence (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

Feminist theorists have also addressed this issue, recognizing various forms of oppression and subjugation in their analysis of women's issues, attributing women's problems to different manifestations of societal oppression. Among their common questions are: How are children socialized? What are the gender differences in surveillance? How do women and men become victims of violence? How are gender representations in the media? What are the legal and supportive responses to women and men? Maljoo also believes that sexual deprivation among men leads to an overpowering sexual gaze towards the female gender, and within this context, boys learn violent behaviours while girls learn silence and passivity. Passivity among girls leads them to remain silent in the face of boys' abuse and violence. Lastly, the reactions of others play a crucial role. The reactive response of society through institutions and others, such as mothers of children, reinforces and reproduces this behaviour, while agency in behaviour can challenge and confront male dominance and violence (Maljoo, 2010: 91).

In the context of violent socialization, the efforts arising from both masochism and sadism (both) by parents contribute to helping individuals escape the unbearable feelings of loneliness and powerlessness. Observations, whether conducted through psychoanalytic methods or other empirical approaches, effectively demonstrate that individuals with

masochistic tendencies harbour profound anxieties about loneliness and degradation.

In most cases, this conscious feeling may be compensated for by mechanisms of self-aggrandizement and perfectionism (Fromm, 2008: 163). Within societal patterns, it frequently occurs that sadism and masochism are mistakenly equated with love, particularly when masochistic phenomena are interpreted as displays of affection. Self-denial and surrendering one's rights are regarded as signs of love and are upheld. It is as though there is no greater proof of our love for someone than sacrificing ourselves and forsaking our own needs. However, the truth is that in these instances, love is a manifestation of yearning stemming from masochism, grounded in an individual's need for coexistence.

If we understand love as the passion that defies denial and is actualized when establishing a connection with the essence of the beloved, or if we define it as unity with another person where the independence and integrity of both parties remain intact, then it is incontrovertible that masochism and love are fundamentally opposed to each other. Love is built on equality and freedom, and if it becomes predicated on subjugation and the loss of completeness for one of the parties, it is no longer love; it assumes the form of a dependency that, no matter how much the underlying reasons and excuses are concealed, ultimately remains rooted in masochism.

Sadism often becomes visible through the acts of love. Most of the time, when someone claims that their dominance over another is for their own good, sadism is mistaken for affection, oblivious to the fact that the main motive is the pleasure derived from exerting superiority (ibid, 173). The nature of power-oriented tendencies is central to the discussion of societal acceptance in comparing sadistic and masochistic drivers. Sadism signifies an insatiable desire for unlimited power over another, and this desire is often intertwined with a sense of destruction. Masochism, on the other hand, entails a longing to become helpless in the face of overpowering power and to partake in its force and glory.

Both sadistic and masochistic tendencies stem from the individual's incapacity to tolerate loneliness and their need for a coexisting relationship that can overcome this loneliness (ibid, 228). The sadistic aspect goes hand in hand with the masochistic aspect. On one hand, it brings forth a desire for dominance over helpless beings, and on the other hand, it yearns to submit to overpowering forces and seeks to render the self-unattainable. In instances where the masochistic aspect becomes apparent, it is frequently heard that the individual is nothing and is not taken into account, and they must accept their insignificance and feel a sense of superiority in a higher power and revel in the force and glory of that power (ibid, 239). The patterns of masochism and sadism consistently manifest in the realm of a violence-prone society, creating and reinforcing the foundation for sexual abuse.

The Privacy of the Family as a Sanctuary

The privacy of the family is often considered a personal domain where others and external institutions such as intervention centres, police, and courts are not allowed to interfere. In such circumstances, individuals who are exposed to violence, especially women and child victims of violence, remain hidden from society's perspective. Additionally, due to lack of awareness or fear of further violence, they do not report the violence to responsible authorities (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

Social Backgrounds and Factors

Studies have shown that perpetrators of sexual violence exhibit less empathy and attachment towards adults and possess strong motivations for sexual dominance compared to the average citizen. Like any other action, sexual violence has social dimensions that without understanding them, any perception of this phenomenon will be incomplete. In this section of the research, we will examine the social backgrounds and factors that influence both the perpetrators and victims of such violence, as reflected in the viewpoints of theoretical perspectives in this field. Family conditions, anomie, sexual inequality and discrimination, the function of violence, peer group pressure, and poverty are among the social backgrounds

and conditions that have been addressed in the perspectives of scholars in this research and will be further discussed.

Anomic conditions

Socialization is always shaped and structured within a specific social framework. Not only its contents, but also the measure of its success, are influenced by socio-structural conditions and socio-structural consequences. It is likely that the greatest success in socialization occurs in societies where division of labour is simple and knowledge distribution is minimal. In such conditions of socialization, identities are formed that are socially predetermined and relatively easy to explain. Therefore, identity can be seen as a well-defined concept that generally represents a tangible reality in which identity exists. In such a society, identities can be easily identifiable both objectively and mentally. However, in societies characterized by anomic conditions and perceived as complex and chaotic, individuals are confined to the objective reality of their society, even though that reality may be alien to them mentally. Socialization of such individuals will not be successful, meaning that they will experience a high degree of asymmetry between the distorted reality of the society, in which they are practically trapped as if they have fallen into an alien world, and their mental reality, which reflects the world in a very inadequate way.

Individuals who find themselves in such anomic conditions do not achieve success in socialization and are socially defined as stigmatized, disabled, illegitimate, foolish, sexually abused, etc. As a result, all the conflicting identities that sometimes emerge in their self-awareness lack justifiable structures, ultimately turning them into something more than fleeting fantasies (Berger, 2008: 222-225).

The theory of anomie primarily provides an explanation for why some individuals violate rules and laws, such as why some commit acts of sexual violence like rape. Merton initially refutes the notion that humans are inherently deviant beings driven by irresistible impulses. According to Merton, contrary to Hobbesian assumptions about human nature, the root of individuals' deviation from social norms lies not in their nature

but in the social structure. Therefore, instead of asking why individuals become conforming, Merton suggests asking why they become nonconforming or deviant. The main question is: how do certain social structures exert specific pressures on certain individuals in society, causing them to become nonconforming rather than conforming? (Merton, 1968: 432, cited in Kowsari: 2003: 19).

According to Merton, 'two elements are important in the cultural structure of society, and these two elements are analytically separable but concretely intertwined: goals and means' (ibid). Merton defines goals as 'purposes and interests defined and determined by society's culture and derived as legitimate goals for all members of society or specific segments of it. Goals are the frame of reference for normative behaviour, meaning matters that are worth striving for,' and means are defined by him as 'the second element (cultural structure) that determines, regulates, and monitors the acceptable ways of achieving these goals' (ibid). Thus, anomie, as conceptualized by Merton, refers to the discrepancy between cultural goals and institutionalized means and the resulting acceptance of unconventional means to achieve those goals.

Merton also declares that, 'deviation occurs when cultural goals are heavily emphasized, and the means of achieving those goals are only influenced by technical norms rather than institutional norms' (Merton, 1968: 433-4, cited in Kowsari: 2003: 19). This theory pays more attention to the position of the lower class in the social structure. According to him, society encourages and motivates all individuals, including members of the lower class, to strive towards middle to upper-class goals, while economic and social constraints make this difficult or even impossible. Therefore, individuals in the lower class who perceive their path as blocked and consequently feel deprived and discontented may resort to deviant and unconventional methods to achieve their desired goals. However, Merton argues that due to the complexity of social structure, individuals do not have a uniform response to disordered conditions. Based on individuals' orientations towards cultural goals and acceptable means to achieve them, he identifies five modes of adaptation to social disorder:

conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. All of these options, except conformity, represent forms of adaptive responses to social disorder (Merton, 1980: 122-116, cited in Serajzadeh, 2007: 86). The modes of adaptation can be illustrated in the following table:

Institutionalized Means	Cultural Goals	Modes of Adaptation
Conformity		
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	+/-	+/-

Table 3 Merton's five modes of adaptation

Merton's five modes of adaptation are in response to the inconsistency between cultural goals and institutionalized means. The table lists the institutionalized means (+) and cultural goals (+) as well as their absence (-), and shows how individuals adapt to the inconsistency between the two. The five modes of adaptation are:

Conformity: Individuals who conform accept both the cultural goals and institutionalized means of achieving them.

Innovation: Individuals who innovate accept the cultural goals but reject the institutionalized means, and therefore create new, often deviant, means of achieving their goals.

Ritualism: Individuals who ritualize reject the cultural goals but accept the institutionalized means, and therefore become overly focused on the means rather than the goals.

Retreatism: Individuals who retreat reject both the cultural goals and institutionalized means of achieving them, and therefore withdraw from society.

Rebellion: Individuals who rebel reject both the cultural goals and institutionalized means, but rather than withdrawing, actively create new goals and means that challenge the existing social structure.

These modes, according to Merton, are major concepts that explain multiple social deviations and issues. Among these types of anomie, our discussion mostly relates to the second type of anomie, which is innovation. In other words, sexual violence is one of the social deviations that falls into this category. Individuals who commit sexual violence embrace cultural goals, which can be seen as satisfying their needs, but reject the means of achieving those goals, which are the frameworks of these needs in the form of the family institution and other legitimate paths. Therefore, sexual violence falls into the second mode of adaptation, which is innovation.

Sexual discrimination and inequality

According to the theory of conflict, society is in a constant struggle between groups and social classes, and as a result, it is subject to change. Resources, not only material resources but also other resources such as power and limited influence, exist, and some social structures have more resources than others, which gives them a higher position and greater ability to maintain their position. The theory of conflict argues that society is always changing and conflicting over resources, so competition for resources is at the heart of all social relationships. Inequality exists in all social structures, and change occurs due to competition over resources, interests, and preferences.

From a sociological perspective, the question that can be asked is: Who benefits? Therefore, one can ask who benefits from sexual violence within society. Again, this sociological question does not have a simple answer, but since the 1970s, some answers have been provided that include gender analysis at

their core. Thinking about sexual violence in this way demonstrates why both structural functionalism and conflict theories are useful in understanding how society operates.

Some Marxist feminists have used Marxist analyses to explain the basis of women's oppression. They argued that women's oppression is a symptom of capitalist exploitation. They sought to find the root of women's oppression in the fact that women work without income at home and work outside the home for income. Women who try to balance between these two situations appear in both situations: they work more than their share at home and receive less wages and their work is considered less valuable in the workplace.

Socialist feminist theorists believe that to explain women's subordination, attention should be paid to both capitalist forces and patriarchy simultaneously. They sought to analyse the functioning of sexual relations in all areas of social life. Many second-wave feminists in the 1970s, based on a conflict approach, reflected on society, examined sexual inequalities, and sought answers to the question of why women experience discrimination and oppression.

In this context, many scholars criticized the Marxist economic analysis for its gender blindness and its inability to analyse the subordinate position of women compared to men within and outside the family. The combined perspective of sociology has been described as a dual-system theory, but it has been argued that scholars tend to consider these two separately and distinct from each other, attributing economic production to capitalism and reproductive production to patriarchy.

Second-wave feminist theorists advocate for recognizing the 'sexual differences' they believe are natural and the 'gender differences' they believe are socially constructed and changeable. During this period, many issues related to women's oppression, such as unequal wages and discrimination in the labour market, domestic violence, and other threats faced by women, received attention. For many feminists of this generation, it was important to examine all the mentioned aspects that lead to women's oppression and

subordination as sociological subjects that are the result of social organization.

This approach can contribute to justifying gender inequality in the public sphere, as capitalism has undoubtedly benefited from the marginalization of women in the workforce. Throughout the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, it became evident that while liberal feminism had achieved significant advancements through mechanisms such as suffrage, property ownership, and marriage rights, patriarchy still remained undefeated. Various feminist viewpoints have emerged, but they concur that patriarchy is a fundamental element for understanding gender roles.

Liberal feminists, in particular, aimed to expand the central concept of classical liberalism, which is individual freedom, to include women alongside men. For them, freedom meant 'freedom from coercion and pressure and the right to have moral agency and personal satisfaction' (Jalaeepour and Mohammadi, 2009: 68). Feminists during this era viewed the oppression of women by men as an unjust and irrational injustice that needed to be eradicated. Betty Friedan drew upon the distinction made by Parsons between instrumental and expressive values. Friedan argued that the expectation for women to confine their activities and interests to the private sphere leads to depression, addiction, and experiences of violence.

The political strategy of liberal feminists focused on implementing legal reforms to eliminate discriminatory practices in all areas of the public sphere. Their goal was to challenge and dismantle the barriers that hindered women's full participation in society. By advocating for equal rights and opportunities, liberal feminists sought to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

In addition to liberal feminists, it is important to acknowledge the perspective of radical feminists. Radical feminists emphasize the systemic and collective suppression of women by men. According to these feminists, certain groups of men employ various techniques, whether real or simply

threatening, to control women. These techniques range from sexual assault, sterilization, and foot-binding to physical abuse and sexual harassment. Radical feminists argue that these forms of violence and control are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and must be dismantled in order to achieve gender equality.

In summary, the feminist perspectives discussed here shed light on the ways in which gender inequality is perpetuated in the public sphere. Liberal feminists focus on legal reforms and expanding individual freedoms, while radical feminists highlight the collective and systemic suppression of women by men. Both perspectives contribute to the understanding of gender roles and advocate for the eradication of gender-based oppression.

Education level

According to Jewkes and colleagues, women who have higher levels of education and women who are economically empowered are more susceptible to physical violence because they experience physical violence from an intimate partner. In a national survey in South Africa, women with low levels of education had much less experience of sexual violence compared to those with higher levels of education. In Zimbabwe, women who were employed reported experiencing more instances of forced sexual intercourse by their husbands compared to those who were unemployed. One explanation for this relationship is that when women become economically empowered, they are more resistant to patriarchal norms. In such situations, men may resort to violence in order to regain control over women. The relationship between empowerment and physical violence follows a U-shaped pattern, where higher levels of empowerment are associated with increased exposure to violence until a certain threshold, beyond which protection begins. However, it is still unclear whether this relationship also applies to sexual violence or not (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

Legal and political factors

Significant differences exist among different countries regarding the prevalence of sexual violence. In some countries,

the definition of rape is broad and includes spousal rape, and severe punishments are prescribed for perpetrators. Commitment to preventing sexual violence is reflected in available resources, with emphasis on training the police and allocating appropriate resources to address this issue, prioritizing sexual assault cases. On the other end of the spectrum, there are countries with much weaker approaches to this issue, where convicting a perpetrator is only possible based on evidence and testimony from the victim. In these countries, certain forms of sexual violence may not be legally considered a crime, and many victims of rape in these countries refrain from pursuing legal action out of fear of punishment (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002).

Intermediate and Institutional Level

Functionality of violence

From the perspective of structural functionalism, violence against women is an element of society. Structural functionalism focuses on the ways social institutions provide for social needs. The family is a key example in this approach, where all aspects of the family are seen as cooperative for functional solidarity. An important question asked in this approach is: What is the function or purpose of the actions of an individual, institution, or system? Therefore, one can ask, what is the function of sexual violence for society? Multiple answers to this question have been given by psychologists, while the answers given in this approach have less emphasis on individuals. Sociology's response to this question is complex and requires the analysis of gender policies, gender role theory, sexual relationships, and criminal law.

However, one response is that sexual violence acts to keep all women in a state of fear because it is impossible for a vulnerable woman to identify which man can be trusted and lead a safe life. Thus, it maintains patriarchy. Structural functionalism has been criticized because it does not examine social life elements in terms of their functionality but does not provide an analysis of potential futures. It supports the existing state and from this perspective, it is difficult to understand the

paths of change. Therefore, in response to the question of the functionality of sexual violence for the stability of society, structural functionalism can provide us with an answer about the present time but does not offer a framework for how the circumstances can change.

Family conditions

In the modern world, after the 18th century, sexual relations with relatives are strongly prohibited within the family, as the family plays the role of a system of connection. However, continuous and persistent sexual relationships are still sought within the family. This is because the family is a constant stimulus for sexuality. The system of sexuality, which initially evolved and developed on the margins of family institutions (in conscience management and education), gradually repositioned the family as its centre. Anything strange, unattainable, and risky that the system of sexuality could have in relation to the system of connection came under the responsibility of the family, which was reorganized and undoubtedly restricted and strengthened its old functions in the system of connection. Parents and spouses became the main agents of the system of sexuality, which relied on doctors, trainers, and later psychotherapists outside the family, and prevailed over intimate relationships within. Soon, these relationships became 'psychological' or 'psychotherapeutic.'

Thus, these new characters appeared in the family: the nervous woman, the moody woman, the indifferent or obsessive mother, the sexually incompetent, abusive, and deviant husband, the hysterical or neurotic daughter, the precocious and prematurely mature child, and the young homosexual man who refrains from marriage or neglects his wife. These characters are mixed manifestations of deviant connection and abnormal sexuality, carriers of abnormal sexual disorders within the distorted system of connection, and enable the system of connection to validate its rights within the system of sexuality. The family, as the foundation of connection, is the nucleus of all sexual miseries. At least from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, we have witnessed families that follow the smallest signs of sexuality, reveal the most difficult

confessions, listen to anyone who knows something about it, and fully open their doors to endless examination. In the system of sexuality, the family is a crystal: it seems to disseminate or actually reflects and disperses sexuality.

With its permeability and this game of outward reflection, the family becomes one of the most valuable tactical elements of the system of sexuality. Trapped and saturated families with this sexuality asked for judgment and treatment from them. Psychoanalysis, which seemed to exclude the confession of sexuality from the realm of the family in its techniques, recycled the laws of connection and mixed games of marriage, kinship, and incest within the framework of this sexuality as a form of formation and comprehensibility (Foucault, 2005: 127-131).

In the late 18th century, as the establishment of compulsory residence centres was defended and considered the right of families who did not want to be dishonoured, the public order could no longer tolerate lowliness and shamelessness. Preserving the dignity and honour of the family requires that anyone who engages in condemnable and inappropriate behaviour, such as sexual harassment that brings shame to their parents, be expelled and disappear from society, as exemplified by the escape of girls from their families due to sexual abuse (Foucault, 2009: 80).

In fact, speaking the truth about oneself (the experience of abuse) and transcending oneself are congruent. This self-disclosure is simultaneously self-destructive. The abused individual, due to the obstacles and circumstances of the family, is not attentive to the relationship between their mind and the social world, and what occupies their mind is the nature, quality, and essence of their thoughts (Foucault, 2017: 106-118).

Although families have undergone significant changes and experienced a decrease in their importance in the social life of today's humans in recent decades, they still remain one of the most important social institutions in the contemporary world. Based on the theoretical perspectives examined in this study, dysfunction in family functions, resource scarcity within the

family, economic pressure, and the family dimension are among the characteristics that influence sexual violence in society.

Dysfunction in family

One of the most important functions of the family is to teach the concept of love and the art of loving. Love is essentially a growth that preserves both the integrity and individuality of a person. The power of love demolishes the walls that separate individuals from their counterparts and connects them to others. It allows one to be oneself and maintain their integrity while overcoming feelings of separation and isolation. The contradiction inherent in love is that two individuals become one, yet they remain distinct (Fromm, 2015: 50). Love is the very bond that stands in contrast to masochistic and sadistic attachment relationships, and the first place where an individual becomes familiar with its pattern is the family. This aspect is one of the most significant functions of the family as the primary institution of social acceptance.

The model of maternal love is inherently unconditional. Unconditional love is, in fact, connected to one of our deep desires. On the other hand, being loved by someone for their virtues or because they are deserving of love is always subject to doubt and uncertainty. There is always a fear that love may come to an end. In reality, this person is not truly loved but merely utilized for their benefits. We all, in childhood and adulthood, seek the nurturing love of a mother, and it is crucial for the mother to possess this skill and be able to teach it.

However, the relationship with the father and his model is different. The father represents another aspect of human existence. He represents law, the world of order and discipline. The father is the one who teaches the child responsibility and shows them the path of life. Thus, the function of the family, through the maternal and paternal models, is the evolution of human existence in terms of love and responsibility. If either of these models is inappropriate, we will face challenges in the development of human existence (Ibid, 98-101).

To explain and clarify how the family, its structure, and its functioning can lead to violence against children, we can use the theory of micro-level order by Chalabi (2012). According to Chalabi's belief, the family faces four major problems that it must address in order to survive and continue. These major problems include economic (dimension A), emotional (dimension G), social (dimension I), and educational (dimension L) issues.

The economic dimension (dimension A) refers to the family's economic sphere, which is related to providing for the family's needs and economic requirements. Any disruption in this area, such as insufficient income leading to the inability to meet the family's economic needs, poses a problem.

In the managerial dimension (dimension G), the issue of family management and administration is highlighted. In order for the family to function properly, it must effectively manage its affairs.

The social dimension (dimension I) focuses on the relationships between family members and external groups. According to Chalabi (2012), the family falls within the social domain. Relationships in this domain should be warm, based on emotions and feelings rather than self-interest and gain. If, for any reason, relationships between family members or between the family and external groups are disrupted, the family faces challenges in this dimension.

In the educational dimension (dimension L), the issue of teaching values and life rules by adults to younger members, especially children, is addressed. This is referred to as 'socialization' in the literature of this field.

According to Chalabi (2012), if we want to eliminate or reduce violence within the family, each of these four dimensions of the family and its members must first have a common fate, meaning shared goals. Second, they must agree on addressing biased judgments, meaning they should support each other in resolving family issues. Third, family members should have empathy in solving the aforementioned problems, being understanding and supportive of one another. Finally, family members should consult and collaborate with each other. Any

disruption in these aspects can lead to dysfunction or malfunction within the family and result in conflicts among family members, ultimately leading to violence, especially against the weaker or powerless members.

Peer pressures

Some forms of sexual violence, such as gang rape, are often perpetrated by young individuals. Sexual aggression is commonly associated with masculinity within the group and is closely tied to the desire for respect within the group. Sexually aggressive behaviours among young men are linked to gang affiliation and association with delinquent peers. Research indicates that men who engage in sexually aggressive behaviour with peers are more likely to report engaging in forced sexual intercourse compared to men without sexually aggressive peers. Sexual assault is often committed by men who view it as a legitimate act, sometimes considering it a punishment for women who engage in 'immoral' behaviour or at least discouraging them from engaging in such behaviours, such as wearing revealing clothing or attending certain gatherings. For this reason, a portion of society may not perceive these perpetrators as real criminals. In some regions, such as Papua New Guinea, women are punished for gang rape, often carried out by adult men.

Individual and Psychological Level

Self-perception

The agency and personal experience of individuals form the first level or layer of social ostracism. The effects of ostracism on individuals are often negative, including the loss of important aspects of self and a threat to one's self-concept. These effects can manifest in various ways, such as general negative emotions (fear, notoriety, reduced self-confidence, emotional deprivation, etc.) or defensive reactions that follow. (Firoozabadi, 2013: 71-73).

In general, all mechanisms of individual control operate in a dualistic manner, through binary categorization and marking, as well as through compulsory determination of characteristics

and differentiating distribution. What guides all these power mechanisms is the rules of a strategy (Foucault, 2014: 167). These dualistic categorization and differentiating distribution methods, as power mechanisms, have become internalized over time and influence self-perception. In fact, the human subject is constructed through language structures and ideologies. Phenomena at the individual and social levels are socially constructed through shared language structures. The way we speak and perceive ourselves and the world, as well as our attitudes towards them, all form discourses through which we experience the world, and only the identification of the effects of discourse in terms of ideology and power is possible (Burr, 2015: 38-39).

The way people think about themselves and represent their experiences to themselves and others does not depend on an inherent and preexisting human nature, but on particular social and economic arrangements that are prevalent and dominant in a certain era within their culture (ibid: 60). By categorizing people into normal and abnormal, insane and sane, healthy and sick groups; society's control became possible by regulating various behaviours in the domains of work and home and politics. Thus, the sexually abused person is identified as someone with an unhealthy or abnormal sexuality; they are deprived of forming a family and also accept this themselves, influenced by this very process, based on the image they hold of themselves (ibid: 67).

One concept for understanding the symbolic interactionist approach is Cooley's concept of the looking-glass self, which claims that one's feelings about oneself are acquired through interaction with others. In this context, MacKinnon argues that women evaluate their situation in relation to any assault they have heard of or even sometimes in general. Walter also states that today women know they are judged not because of their competencies and skills, but because of the similarities they have with sexual stars (porn stars). According to Cooley there are three components to the looking-glass self: first, we imagine how we appear to others, then we interpret others' judgments about that appearance, and then we develop our self-feelings on the basis of others' judgments and our

interpretations of them. By focusing on micro-level interactions, the important questions to be asked are as follows: Do some people understand specific phenomena differently than others in society? Therefore, it can be asked, do women and men have different understandings of sexual violence in society?

Low self-control

In this regard, we can also refer to the theory of self-control, which is a general theory of crime. This theory was introduced by Gottfredson and Hirschi in 1990, based on control theories. It is based on the assumption that male sexual desire is uncontrollable. There are men who believe that their sexual desires are uncontrollable, and they are not responsible for their actions. Advocates of this theory believe that sexual control is difficult for men, and women also play an important role in undermining or weakening this control because they abstain from sexual relations, forcing men to repress their sexual needs. Gottfredson and Hirschi argue that those seeking non-criminal acts such as rape cannot delay the satisfaction of their needs. Furthermore, they believe that committing a crime is easy and exciting, and with minimal skill, they can cause harm to others. Therefore, individuals with low self-control are more impulsive, adventurous, and self-centred, and due to the perceived benefits of crime, they are more likely to commit it (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Men with lower self-control may seek sexual relationships without consent, making them more likely to commit sexual assault (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

Criminal motivation

If we approach the issue of sexual violence from a perspective of volitional intent, the presence of an actor with the intent and motivation for sexual violence is undoubtedly a necessary condition in this context. In other words, the existence of a motivated criminal is the first condition for committing a crime (the potential existence of a criminal), and the existing conditions must sufficiently provoke them to commit the crime (Cohen and Felson, 1979).

Narcissism

The narcissistic reaction theory regarding sexual assault is based on the following model: When a man desires sexual relations with a woman, and the woman refuses, two options remain for him: either accepting her refusal or using force to achieve sexual intercourse. Individuals who are narcissistic and have low self-control find an inaccessible woman more attractive, so they strive to have sexual intercourse with her, and they may resort to violence against women because she is seen as the one who has restricted their freedom. According to this theory, individuals with narcissistic traits have a strong sense of entitlement, which can lead to higher expectations regarding sexual relations compared to other men. A narcissistic man perceives a woman's refusal of sexual intercourse as an insult, regardless of her reasons. Moreover, a narcissistic man is more likely to attribute a woman's rejection of sexual relations to personal characteristics rather than situational factors (Baumeister *et al.*, 2002: 5-4).

History of sexual abuse in early life

There is evidence linking experiences of abuse or violence during childhood or adolescence with patterns of victimization in adulthood. A national study on sexual violence against women in the United States shows that women who have experienced violence before the age of 18 are more than twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault compared to those who did not experience abuse during childhood or adolescence (18.3% versus 7.7%, respectively). The adverse effects of sexual abuse in early life can potentially lead to other forms of victimization and adult life difficulties. For example, a case study in Australia indicates a significant association between childhood sexual abuse on one hand and experiences of sexual assault, mental and sexual health problems, domestic violence, and other issues related to intimate relationships, even after accounting for various family background characteristics on the other hand. It can be said that the factors that have led to sexual violence against individuals early in life may contribute to the repetition of this cycle in later years (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

Multiple sexual partners

Young women who have multiple sexual partners are at a greater risk of sexual violence. It is unclear whether having more sexual partners is a cause or an effect of sexual abuse, including childhood sexual abuse. For example, findings from a study show that women who have experienced sexual assault during childhood or adolescence are more likely to have more sexual partners in adulthood compared to women who have not experienced sexual violence or have experienced it to a lesser extent (Joukes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

Drug misuse

The utilization of drug and drugs heightens the risk of experiencing sexual violence. When women engage in drug and alcohol use, it hampers their ability to protect themselves by impairing their capacity to accurately interpret and respond to warning signs. Moreover, alcohol consumption may lead women to be in situations where they face an increased risk of encountering potential perpetrators. For instance, they might consume these drugs in settings where potential wrongdoers are present, further amplifying their vulnerability to such circumstances (Joukes *et al.*, 2002: 159).

The Consequences of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence has various dimensions and consequences that may not leave the victim until the end of their life. It leads to psychological problems, death, suicide, forced marriages, ostracism, pregnancy, and disease, among other effects. These consequences have been addressed by some experts in this field, which will be reviewed below.

Emergence of psychological problems

Jeff and his colleagues introduced the theory or hypothesis of family dysfunction. They focus on negative and significant family events and experiences, such as violence against other family members like women and children. According to this theory, a child's perception of themselves, especially in relation to family members, is shaped by their early experiences. If a child experiences violence among other family members or is directly subjected to violence, their psychological and social

functioning becomes disrupted, leading to maladjustment or inconsistency in their later stages of life (Aliyarinejad *et al.*, 2011). Jeff and others in the theory or hypothesis of family dysfunction address the adaptive problems of children facing violence. This theory is based on the efforts of children to cope with and confront threatening conditions that bring about significant changes in their lives. Children must find a way to cope with violence and its consequences, including various forms of aggression, violence, or abuses, and various disruptions within the family. According to this theory, the experience of violence affects children in two ways: first, children, especially younger children, are directly affected by inappropriate and violent parental behaviours. Spousal aggression and violence make children feel insecure (Aliyarinejad *et al.*, 2011). Giddens also emphasized the importance of childhood experiences in forming fundamental trust and existential security. In his view, this trust is rooted in childhood experiences and is largely derived from good parenting. He explains that fundamental trust leads to 'existential security' (Giddens, 2008). If this trust is not formed due to the experience of violence, it can jeopardize a child's existential security. In such circumstances, the child feels that the world is an unsafe and dangerous place (Giddens, 2008). Other consequences of experiencing or witnessing violence include the violent behaviour of the child and their subsequent acts of violence. Second, this theory emphasizes the indirect effects of undesirable upbringing and ineffective management of marital and family conflicts and their effects on children. In these circumstances, children assess risky situations as lower than actual, which can expose them to danger (Haghi *et al.*, 2017).

Death

The use of physical force is not necessarily limited to rape, and physical injuries are not always among its consequences. Deaths related to rape have been recorded, although the methods of rape-related murders vary significantly around the world.

Suicide

It is a common belief that women who are sexually assaulted in childhood or adulthood are more likely to commit suicide than other women. This association persists after controlling for gender, age, education, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, and remaining psychiatric disorders. The experience of sexual violence or sexual assault can lead to suicidal behaviour in early adolescence. In Ethiopia, 6% of students who had experienced rape reported attempting suicide. This finding was also reported in another study among Brazilian adolescents, where thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts were more common among them.

Forced marriage

It has been said that in many cultural contexts, men are unable to control their sexual impulses, and women are responsible for arousing men's sexual desire. How families and communities react to acts of rape in such conditions is understandable in terms of prevailing ideas about gender and women's status. In some societies, the 'cultural solution' to rape is to force the victim to marry the perpetrator, thus preserving the woman's honour and her family's honour. Such a solution is also present in the laws of some countries, allowing a man who has committed rape to be acquitted of his crime if he marries the woman he has raped. Apart from marriage, families may pressure women not to report or pursue a case in this regard, or focus their attention on obtaining financial compensation from the perpetrator's family (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002).

Exile

In some other countries, families and close relatives of victims may expel them from their homes and communities in an attempt to restore their lost honour, and in more severe cases, they may even kill them (Jewkes *et al.*, 2002).

In totalitarian systems, they deal with victims of sexual abuse in a way that makes them seem rebellious and traitorous (Arendt, 2015: 300). In these regimes, both the innocent and the guilty are equally unworthy. The transformation in the

concepts of crime and criminality defines the methods of the emerging and horrifying secret police of the totalitarian regime. Criminals are simply punished, but the unworthy vanish from the page of history. Among them, the only sign that remains is the memory of those who knew them and loved them. The anonymity of victims of the secret police of the totalitarian regime, whom one cannot consider as enemies of the regime, goes beyond any secrecy and silence and even the dual life imposed by the conspiratorial societies on their members is preserved in the face of this anonymity (ibid., 288).

Pregnancy

One of the consequences of sexual abuse is pregnancy, and its prevalence depends on various factors, especially the use of contraception, which is prohibited in some contexts. A study in Ethiopia showed that 17% of adolescents became pregnant after sexual abuse, a figure similar to that reported by the Crisis Centre for Rape in Mexico.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), almost 3 million women in the United States have experienced rape-related pregnancy during their lifetime. The CDC also reports that about 18 million women have experienced vaginal rape in their lifetime.¹ Additionally, a study from 1996 in the USA found that among pregnant rape survivors:

- 32.2% kept the infant
- 50% underwent induced abortion
- 5.9% gave the infant up for adoption
- 11.8% had a miscarriage²

In many countries, women who have been sexually abused are forced to give birth to babies or risk their lives by resorting to illegal abortions. The experience of forced sexual intercourse at a young age makes adolescent girls who are forced into

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/sexual-violence/about/pregnancy-resulting-from-rape.html>

² https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/77431/WHO_RHR_12.43_eng.pdf

sexual relationships without using condoms or other forms of contraception more likely to become pregnant. Forced sexual intercourse can also lead to unwanted pregnancies among adult women. A study in India showed that men who admitted to having forced sexual intercourse with their wives were 2.6 times more likely to have unintended pregnancies among them.

Disease transmission

The transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases is recognized as a consequence of sexual abuse. Research on women in shelters/refuges has shown that women who have been sexually abused by their sexual partners are significantly more likely to suffer from sexually transmitted diseases. The risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases is high among women who are trafficked for prostitution. It has also been identified as the 'complexity of women's diseases' related to forced sexual intercourse. These diseases include vaginal bleeding or infection, fibroids, decreased sexual desire, decreased sexual arousal, pain during intercourse, chronic pelvic pain, and urinary tract infections. Women who have experienced sexual and physical abuse are at greater risk of health-related hazards compared to women who have only experienced physical abuse.

Sexual Violence Strategies

An abuser seeks to escape from loneliness or the feeling of captivity by turning another person into a part or fragment of their own existence. They consider themselves superior by dominating the other person and feel proud. Abusers and the abused are interdependent to some extent, and neither of them can live without the other. The only difference is that one exploits, injures, and humiliates, while the other is exploited, harmed, and humiliated. Abusers give orders and are exploited; they inflict harm and suffer humiliation. These two individuals are so similar that there is no difference between them: a connection without integration. Understanding this, we will no longer be surprised when we see people reacting aggressively and abusively towards others and various matters (Fromm, 2015: 48). The transformation in the concepts of

crime and criminality defines the methods of the emerging and horrifying secret police of the totalitarian regime. Criminals are simply punished, but the unworthy vanish from the page of history. Among them, the only sign that remains is the memory of those who knew them and loved them. The anonymity of victims of the secret police of the totalitarian regime, whom one cannot consider as enemies of the regime, goes beyond any secrecy and silence, and even the dual life imposed by the conspiratorial societies on their members is preserved in the face of this anonymity.

The outcome in each of these cases is individuals who have become psychologically alienated or disconnected from their core humanity. These people are no longer easily comprehensible through conventional psychological frameworks. Their journey back to a state of psychological coherence or rational understanding is comparable to the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus. All psychological and sociological rules only work to encourage those who think that constantly thinking about fears stems from the individual's worthlessness. If it is true that the concentration camp is the most important institution of totalitarian rule, then 'constantly thinking about fears' is an inescapable understanding of totalitarianism. Murder is only a limited evil. A person who commits murder, despite the inevitability of death, engages in actions within the familiar realm of life and death. Both the perpetrator and the victim share a fundamental, albeit unconscious, relationship rooted in dialectics. The perpetrator attempts to erase the victim's existence by disposing of the body and eliminating evidence of the crime. However, these actions reflect the perpetrator's own identity rather than the memories and grief of those who loved the victim. While the perpetrator can end a life, they cannot erase the existence of the person.

Turning a human being into a set of reactions, like a mental illness, deeply separates him from anything that is his personality or trait. If they remain alive, they are more separated from the world of the living than the dead, because fear takes hold of their being. This fear never comes to

imagination, because it exists beyond life and death. Also, this fear cannot be reported correctly, because even the survivors who return to the world of the living cannot believe the experiences they have gone through. Totalitarianism, by creating conditions under which its efficiency of conscience is lost and doing good is possible, has been able to expand the conscious and organized complicity of all human beings in totalitarian crimes, even among its victims, and thus give this complicity a complete aspect. Organized complicity between those who exercise power (sexual harasser) and those who are subjected to power (sexual harassment victims) through denial of harassment. The main point is not only that hatred is diverted from the main culprits in this way, but that in these circumstances the line between the wicked and the victim can no longer be distinguished (Arendt, 290-300).

The harassers and the harassed use various methods to face and cope with sexual violence, which can be identified in some theoretical works. Normalization and management of shame are among the coping strategies that the harassed use to deal with the situation, while intimacy and deception are among the strategies that the harassers use in committing sexual violence

Normalization

Based on the psychological approach in dealing with sexual violence, sexual violence is considered a part of everyday life, and many women experience it. Kelly argues that sexual violence is a part of women's daily lives; for example, a significant number of women experience a level of violence from men in public spaces like streets every day. For instance, [20] catcalling is an unusual crime because it often involves targeted and repetitive behaviour towards a specific individual. Kelly also criticizes the psychological approach because it examines violence from a pathological perspective and suggests that violent behaviour has become a part of women's normal lives to which they have become accustomed, offering reasons why women accept such behaviours. Research conducted on this matter has shown that criminals commit crimes in a way that reflects their everyday life behaviours. For

example, sexual offenders may regularly go to a club where many women are using drugs and alcohol. Criminals may take advantage of this opportunity and may even go so far as to purchase alcohol for women to incapacitate them and later sexually assault them when the opportunity arises.

Stigma management

One of Goffman's concepts for analysing social relationships that has the potential to explain the experience of sexual assault is social stigma. The question that arises here is how individuals who have incurred the stigma of sexual assault or engaging in sexual relations outside societal norms and religious boundaries present themselves in their daily lives and how others react to them. This section delves into an examination of this concept.

According to Goffman, identity is not something intrinsic to us or an inherent part of us; rather, we construct it in everyday interactions. For example, through our clothing, speech patterns, and behaviours in response to others, we shape our identity. This construction can vary in interactions with different individuals. Goffman posits that individuals, in their mutual interactions, attempt to display an aspect of themselves that aligns with the agreement or acceptance of others. They always hope to succeed in this endeavour, and their performance should compel others to act accordingly. Goffman interprets this phenomenon as the management of impression or the management of impact. According to Goffman, impression management encompasses strategies that actors use to prevent disruptions in the performance of their roles, which may arise from mechanisms that could potentially disturb their role execution, such as unwarranted interference and gross errors. Rather than focusing on problem-solving mechanisms that may occur during role execution, the emphasis of impression management is more on protecting the actor from unanticipated interferences and errors.

Goffman applies the concept of stigma to individuals who have incurred stigma within society, causing society to view them differently and as outsiders. Stigma creates a distinction between a person's potential social identity and their actual

identity. Stigma refers to qualities or attributes that are shameful and have their roots in social interactions and relationships. It arises from definitions constructed by society before being a result of the inherent quality of a trait or self-behaviour. In other words, stigma represents a set of preconceived notions and societal beliefs about certain groups of people and their characteristics (Goffman, 1963: 33).

According to him, any actor who has created a rift between their two identities is stigmatized. The rift or inconsistency created, whether it is overt or constructed, destroys their social identity. It can even separate them from society and themselves to such an extent that they become a stigmatized individual in the face of an unaccepting world. Essentially, stigma focuses on the performative interaction between stigmatized actors and ordinary individuals, and the consequence of stigmatization is typically positive for those who stigmatize.

The quality that stigma imprints on an individual's forehead can help present another person in a favourable light rather than tarnishing their reputation. Thus, the self-image it imposes may not be either favourable or unfavourable. Goffman also distinguishes between two types of stigma. The first type is manifest stigma, such as an individual with a specific skin condition or someone who has AIDS, and others are aware of it. The second type is hidden stigma, where others are unaware of the individual's attributes or identity, such as someone who has been sexually assaulted, and others are unaware (Goffman, 1963: 4-33).

Naturally, between the identity these two individuals display in their daily lives, there is a noticeable difference in self-management and how others react to them. It can be said that someone whose sexual assault has not been revealed tries to keep it hidden from others. On the other hand, those whose sexual assault has become evident attempt to manage their identity in interactions with others and resist against their suppressed situation, striving to display another identity. In fact, Goffman's theory can be used to analyse the concealment of extramarital sexual relations in Iran. Since extramarital relations are considered taboo in Iran and contrary to societal

values and beliefs, victims and perpetrators of extramarital relations make every effort to keep this matter hidden because they fear the stigma that society would place on them once it becomes known. When someone incurs the stigma of extramarital relations in society, life becomes challenging for them, and they face constant condemnation. Therefore, returning to normal life under circumstances where the individual is constantly reproached becomes difficult and sometimes impossible.

Intimacy and deception

Intimacy and deception are strategies employed by sexual aggressors to commit sexual violence. According to this strategy, the desire for social or intimate interaction is a natural human response, and difficulty in attaining it can lead to misinterpretation of social-sexual cues and may even lead to sexual assault. However, close and intimate perpetrators often resort to deception when establishing a connection with the victim. This includes behaviours such as verbal communication, inquiring about their lifestyle, requesting the victim's participation in sexual activities, and even expressing a desire to see them again.

A Critical Look at the Background of Research in Iran and the World

The field of sexual violence studies is quite extensive due to the wide spectrum of acts it encompasses. Some forms of sexual violence, such as intimate partner violence, have been well-studied, while others, like incestuous abuse, which itself has various forms, have received less attention in research. One particular form that has been relatively less explored is maternal abuse of children. It can be said that the study of sexual violence is extensive due to the multiple dimensions and various contexts of this phenomenon. Sometimes children are victims, sometimes it's the offspring, sometimes women, and in other cases, men. Additionally, sexual violence is intertwined with social, psychological, biological, and legal aspects. Alongside all these aspects, the studies in the field of treatment and overcoming the consequences of sexual abuse should also be considered, which is a very broad area.

In Iranian society, due to the taboo nature of this phenomenon and the lack of access to national data, the field of sexual violence has not been thoroughly explored. National research in this area is limited, and the few studies conducted by interested researchers reveal the depth of suffering experienced by victims, including children. Despite the prevalence of this phenomenon in society, not only are there insufficient support mechanisms for these victims, but in many cases, societal norms and laws compound the injustice they endure.

The dominance of religious authorities, coupled with politics, has limited scientific studies and effective support in the form of therapeutic and legal assistance. In this section, we provide an overview of empirical studies conducted in this field. The review of these studies focuses on the scope and types of misconduct and violence against children, the contexts in which sexual violence occurs with children, the effects and consequences of sexual violence against children, and finally, the strategies of both perpetrators and victims.

Misbehaviour and violence against children

Misbehaviour and violence against children are historical phenomena prevalent throughout the geographical expanse of human societies. Some studies have focused on this aspect of child abuse, among which the works of Stoltenborgh and others (2015) and Razgar and Nashatdoust (2006) can be mentioned. Stoltenborgh *et al.* (2015) employed a meta-analytic approach to investigate the prevalence of misbehaviour against children worldwide. Researchers in this study combined and compared the results of various meta-analyses to estimate the prevalence of different types of child abuse. The findings indicate that the overall prevalence estimate based on self-report studies (mostly assessing child maltreatment during childhood) is 127 per thousand for sexual abuse (76 per thousand among boys and 180 per thousand among girls), 226 per thousand for physical abuse, 363 per thousand for emotional abuse, 163 per thousand for physical neglect, and 164 per thousand for emotional neglect. The overall prevalence estimated in expert studies (mostly

assessing one-year prevalence of misbehaviour) for sexual abuse is 4 per thousand, and for physical and emotional child abuse, it is three per thousand.

In conclusion, researchers using the findings of this study argue that misbehaviour against children is a widespread and global phenomenon that affects the lives of millions of children worldwide. This is in stark contrast to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Stoltenborgh *et al.*, 2015). In another study, Ansari *et al.* (2012) investigated the prevalence of physical, psychological, and sexual violence and related factors among married women in the city of Zahedan. The findings indicate a high prevalence of physical, psychological, and sexual violence among women in Zahedan, with their respective averages being 5.4%, 20.9%, and 9.7%. Furthermore, Razgar and Nashatdoust (2006) in their study titled 'Investigating Population and Family Factors Affecting Child Abuse in Isfahan' demonstrate that there is no significant difference between girls and boys in the prevalence of child abuse. Emotional and psychological child abuse is more prevalent than other forms of abuse, and age groups between 5-10 years old have the highest rates of experiencing abuse (Razgar and Nashatdoust, 2006).

Descriptive statistics on child abuse

Descriptive statistics published in some studies have provided a sort of typology for child abuse. For instance, based on the findings of confident scholars like Rahimipour *et al.* (2014), most victims fall into the age group of 20 to 30 years. Their educational background primarily consists of guidance and high school diplomas, with insufficient income. The majority of them are married, and the educational background of their spouses is mostly at the guidance and high school diploma level. In Khademi *et al.*'s study (2017), the findings also indicate that 92% of victims were between the ages of 18 to 27. In terms of education, 2.3% had less than a high school diploma, 36.4% had a high school diploma, 47.7% had an associate degree, and 13.6% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Furthermore, 89.8% of victims were single, 4.5% were married, and 5.7% were divorced.

Some research in this field has focused on studying the differences and similarities in sexual crimes committed by men and women, leading to different typologies of child sexual abuse. According to cross-cultural studies conducted in various countries, sexual crimes by women have both similarities and differences compared to those committed by men. One significant difference is that mothers are often the primary caregivers of children. Bowlby emphasized the importance of the bond between a mother and a child, which lays the foundation for healthy human relationships. Some findings suggest that men report a higher interest in child pornography than women. Women (20%) have reported experiencing sexual abuse during childhood more than men (8%). Moreover, evidence suggests that men's sexual interest in children is relatively common. Additionally, research shows that the prevalence of sexual abuse among women is higher than that among men (Freel, 1999).

In describing the differences between male and female sexual offenders, some findings indicate that often it is a mother or a woman in a motherly role who perpetrates child abuse. On average, female offenders' victims are younger and less adolescent compared to male offenders. The abuse often begins during infancy and continues until the age of 6 to 11. Evidence from a study indicates that 90% of female offenders' victims were under the age of 9, and female offenders tend not to discriminate between male and female victims.

Khademi *et al.* (2017) in their research point out other differences in the behaviour of offenders. According to their findings, 46.6% of the abuses were of a romantic nature, and 94.3% of the abuses were individual in nature.

Keshavarz Valian and Keshavarz Ardakani (2010) have compared child abuse between normal children and children with learning disabilities in elementary school, and their results indicate differences from another perspective. The table below shows the results of child abuse in terms of parents' and children's opinions:

Group	Emotional Abuse	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Neglect	Child Abuse
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Normal Children	14.17 (C), 14.41 (P)	2.33 (C), 1.56 (P)	2.62 (C), 1.70 (P)	27.87 (C), 30.23 (P)	47.19 (C), 47.91 (P)
Children with Learning Disabilities	18.43 (C), 19.02 (P)	2.94 (C), 2.44 (P)	2.27 (C), 2.08 (P)	28.96 (C), 29.91 (P)	52.61 (C), 53.64 (P)

Table 4 Child Abuse Scores among Two Groups of Children Based on Children’s and Parents’ Reports (Keshavarz Valian and Keshavarz Ardakani, 2010: 46)

As the findings indicate, the prevalence of child abuse, particularly neglect and emotional abuse, is higher compared to other forms of child abuse. Children with learning disabilities experience more forms of abuse than normal children (Keshavarz Valian and Keshavarz Ardakani, 2010).

As the findings show, the rate of child abuse in the form of neglect and emotional abuse is higher than other forms of child abuse, and children with learning disabilities experience abuse more than normal children (Keshavarz Valian & Keshavarz Ardestani, 2011).

Bergen *et al.* (2013) conducted an online study on the sexual interests of adults towards children and adolescents. They used a semi-experimental design and had researchers pose as children and adolescents in online chat rooms. The researchers aimed to investigate whether visitors to these chat rooms initiate sexual conversations with children and adolescents, and if so, whether they suggest a way to continue the conversation after realizing the age of the child. The results of 257 interviews showed that sexual interest among adults increased with the age of individuals whose identity was falsified. Requests for in-person meetings were more directed towards individuals who were older or at the legal age (16 to 18 years old) rather than those who were underage (10 to 14 years old). In 25.7% of the discussions with 10 to 12-year-old

children, men wanted to continue sexual relations after the age of the child was revealed. The findings of this study show a strong interest in sexual conversations with children and adolescents among visitors to these chat rooms. However, the level and quality of sexual interest varied depending on the age of the falsified identity and the chat room.

Polman and colleagues (2017) also examined the social (sociological) and biological differences between perpetrators of incestuous rape. According to the researchers, these differences are not always evident in clinical or empirical work and require meta-analytical studies in this area. In this study, the researchers compared a total of 4,192 biological incestuous rapists with 2,322 social incestuous rapists in 27 studies from 1984 to 2012. Social incestuous rapists showed more antisocial tendencies, such as general self-regulation problems, reactance, and drug abuse, compared to biological incestuous rapists. On the other hand, biological incestuous rapists showed more psychological problems, such as repression and mental health problems. These differences were generally small to medium in size. Contrary to expectations, there was no significant difference between the groups in terms of unusual sexual interests, although social incestuous rapists were more likely to have self-regulation problems. During the study, a significant median was shown: biological incestuous rapists were composed of only biological fathers or biological fathers and other biological relatives (such as uncles and grandfathers) (Polman *et al.*, 2017).

Backgrounds and causality of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse, like any other phenomenon, occurs under specific conditions. This fact has not been overlooked in empirical studies of child abuse. Researchers in these studies have pointed out various backgrounds, including psychological-personality, social, cultural, economic, and legal aspects. Below, we highlight some empirical studies in this regard.

Economic background and factors

According to the results of research conducted in this field, the economy is one of the influential factors in the occurrence and perpetuation of child sexual abuse. Economic conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, occupation, and a materialistic view of women, contribute to sexual violence against children. Research by Maljoo has shown that economic backgrounds occur at all economic levels, but the likelihood of its occurrence increases as we move from lower to upper social strata (Maljoo, 2010). Modini Ghahfarokhi and Bayat have also examined the relationship between poverty and child abuse. According to the results of most studies, the relationship between poverty and social problems, such as child abuse, has been reported. However, a few studies have not reported this relationship. Findings indicate that poverty, through four components or pathways, creates the background for child abuse: The first pathway is through family income. In families with low income or in poverty, parents are unable to provide adequately for their children's needs, and due to income generation for the family's survival, neglect of children is noticeable in these families. The second pathway is through housing. Low-quality housing, such as small living spaces and a lack of security due to rental housing, facilitates child abuse. The presence of all family members in a small living environment encourages sexual abuse of children. On the other hand, due to rental housing and frequent relocations, the social support resulting from severed social relationships increases the risk to children, and external environmental hazards threaten them more. The third pathway is through the region of the family's residence. A significant portion of Iranian families, about 20% of the population, due to poverty and cost-cutting in housing, are forced to live in non-formal settlement areas, depriving them of many urban and social services, such as education and health. The fourth pathway is through the relationship between family poverty and child labour. Many poor families send their children into the labour force (Modini Ghahfarokhi and Bayat, 2010). Ansari and colleagues also conclude in their research titled 'Investigating the Incidence of Physical, Psychological, and Sexual Violence and Related Factors in Married Women in Zahedan' that the high incidence of violence against women in

Zahedan is likely due to low economic and social status and lack of literacy and awareness among the population (Ansari *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, Vahid Rahimpour and others have mentioned the role of unemployment in this regard. In their study, they examined the status of post-traumatic stress disorder among women who complained of rape and visited legal medical centres in Tehran. The results of this research indicate that their income is insufficient, and most victims are unemployed (Rahimpour *et al.*, 2014).

The economic background also plays a different role in the occurrence of sexual violence, especially among women. A materialistic view of women affects this issue in various ways, as some studies have not hidden. For example, in the research by Rezaei and Abdar, we read, 'From women's perspective, the conditions for the occurrence of this type of violence are class differences, unemployment, religious justifications, exposure to obscene films, patriarchal thinking, and a materialistic view of women' (Rezaei and Abdar, 2017). Furthermore, it is important not to overlook the role of occupational, economic, and organizational factors in this regard. According to the results of a study, 'Economic, occupational, and organizational factors have taken on a background role in creating sexual violence' (Qazizadeh *et al.*, 2018). In the same context, one can refer to the findings of a comparative typology study on the vulnerability of Afghan and Iranian women residing in Mashhad. According to these findings, the employment of women in false jobs, working in workshops far from the city, in unfamiliar and informal environments, and without supervision, is in itself considered a dangerous factor that exposes women to victimization (Javan Jafari Bojnordi *et al.*, 2016).

Cultural background and factors

Undoubtedly, the cultural background of individuals plays a significant role in creating conditions for phenomena like sexual violence, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by researchers in this field. The microculture of male dominance, on one hand, empowers men with the audacity and power to engage in sexual violence in their relationships with women.

On the other hand, it restrains women from confronting such circumstances. Kamali conducted a study titled 'The Lived Experience of Sexual Assault Victims' using ethnographic and life history methods to investigate this subject. The researcher focused on cases of unmarried women who had remained single. Additionally, the study examined both the incidents of sexual assault and the aftermath. The findings of this research indicate that sexual assault is a stigmatizing mark, a process that continues into the second phase of life in a way that the occurrence of assault and its continuation in the second phase are themselves signs of the oppressive, masculine, and unjust daily life structure in Iran (Kamali, 2010). Qazizadeh and others also conducted a study titled 'A Conceptual Model of Factors Predisposing Wife Abuse Against Men from the Perspective of Men' using a grounded theory approach. Their findings suggest that the dominance of a patriarchal perspective in men's relationships with women is a contributing factor to the occurrence of violence in these relationships. The study highlights that irrational beliefs, gender differences, and marital myths are intervening factors (Qazizadeh *et al.*, 2018).

Other Researchers have identified the dress style and veiling of women as influential factors in the occurrence of violence against young women. In a study conducted on this subject, it was reported that there is a reverse relationship between age, education, veiling, and the prevalence of violence against women in certain crimes such as harassment, sexual assault, abduction, assault, and battery. Among the individuals studied, young women who were less veiled, less educated, or less aware reported higher instances of victimization in crimes against individuals compared to others (Javan Jafari Bojnourdi *et al.*, 2016). Khanjari and colleagues focused on the prevention of sexual misconduct with an emphasis on the awareness, attitudes, and behaviours of parents. They interviewed 536 parents with elementary and pre-elementary school children in schools in Arak city. The findings indicate that 66% of parents had good awareness, 34% had poor awareness, 80.63% had a good attitude level, and 19.37% had a poor attitude level. Additionally, 85.71% had good

performance, and 14.29% had poor performance in preventing sexual misconduct (Khanjari *et al.*, 2014). Some researchers have also pointed to the factor of societal acceptance and its role in the phenomenon of child sexual abuse. According to studies conducted by Ferrell in this field, it is evident that male dominance is associated with child sexual abuse, and the sexual interest of men in children is common in society. Feminists argue that male domination or exploitation by men is the result of their different socialization (Freel, 1999).

Social backgrounds

Social backgrounds, particularly family backgrounds, play a significant role in the occurrence of sexual violence against children, and many researchers have emphasized this. According to the findings of Maljoo's research (2010), sexual abuse is more likely to occur in families with a non-democratic and unruly family structure. It often happens in families with social isolation, a traditional structure based on the breadwinner husband and housewife wife, minimal emotional relationships among family members, domestic disputes and violence between parents, a lack of logic and balance in child-rearing, and parenting styles that are either extremely strict or overly permissive. In these families, male dominance is predominant, and decision-making is entirely one-sided, favouring the father. The most critical issue among these families is the dominance of proprietary attitudes in the father-child relationship. Fathers consider their daughters as property or possessions and treat them accordingly (Maljoo, 2010).

Qazizadeh and colleagues (2018) also consider domestic violence against men by women to have main individual, marital, family, and extra-family dimensions, which further divide into subsidiary factors. According to the findings of this research, a central theme in this conceptual model is inappropriate marriages. In this research, family factors such as unmet differentiation, family structure, power structure in the family, and inappropriate family experiences are identified as background factors (Qazizadeh *et al.*, 2018).

Other researchers have pointed to additional factors in this context, with awareness and education being of particular importance. According to Razgar and Nashatdoust (2006), low parental education is one of the major predictors of abuse.

Legal and supportive contexts

Legal contexts related to the defence of victims and the supportive structures for them are significant policy and macro-level factors that have been the subject of numerous studies in this field. Inadequacies in the criminal justice system and the absence of policies, programs, and supportive actions for survivors of sexual violence are among the challenges that many researchers have highlighted. Irvanian has studied the re-victimization of sexual abuse survivors in the context of social responses and the criminal justice system.

Re-victimization of sexual abuse survivors refers to a wide range of physical injuries and psychological trauma resulting from unfavourable societal reactions and incorrect policies within the criminal justice system that survivors of sexual abuse continue to experience after their initial victimization. Irvanian attributes the origin of such harm to an unsupportive attitude, negative societal perceptions in some cases, and inappropriate policies within the criminal justice system regarding sexual abuse survivors. Denial and neglect of harm, victim abandonment, concealing harmful behaviours, and ultimately victim-blaming are some of the central causes of harm to sexual abuse survivors within society. The absence of reactions to certain sexually harmful behaviours, the adoption of suppressive policies against specific groups of survivors (labelling them as criminals), and, finally, the implementation of unsupportive and non-specific response policies for survivors who, despite accepting their victimization, have unique needs and problems in the criminal justice process are some of the most critical contexts of re-victimization of sexual abuse survivors within the criminal justice system (Irvanian, 2010). Irvanian illustrates the social and criminal justice

contexts of re-victimization of sexual abuse survivors through two models:

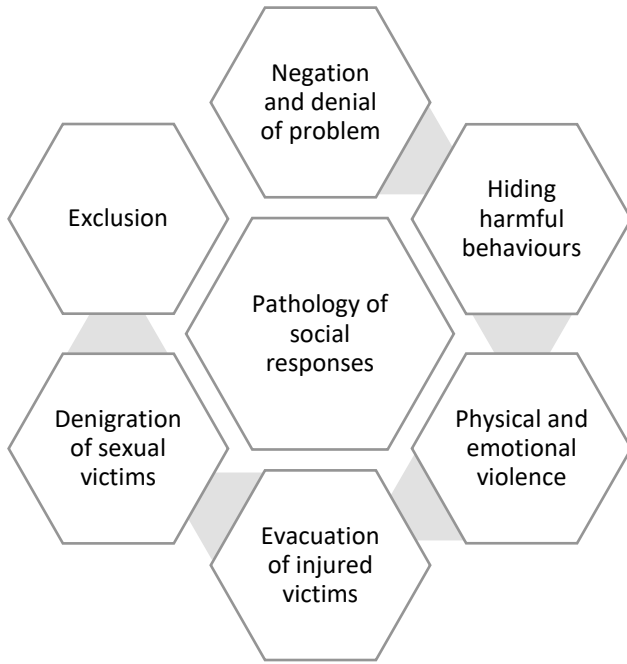


Figure 4 Pathology of social responses

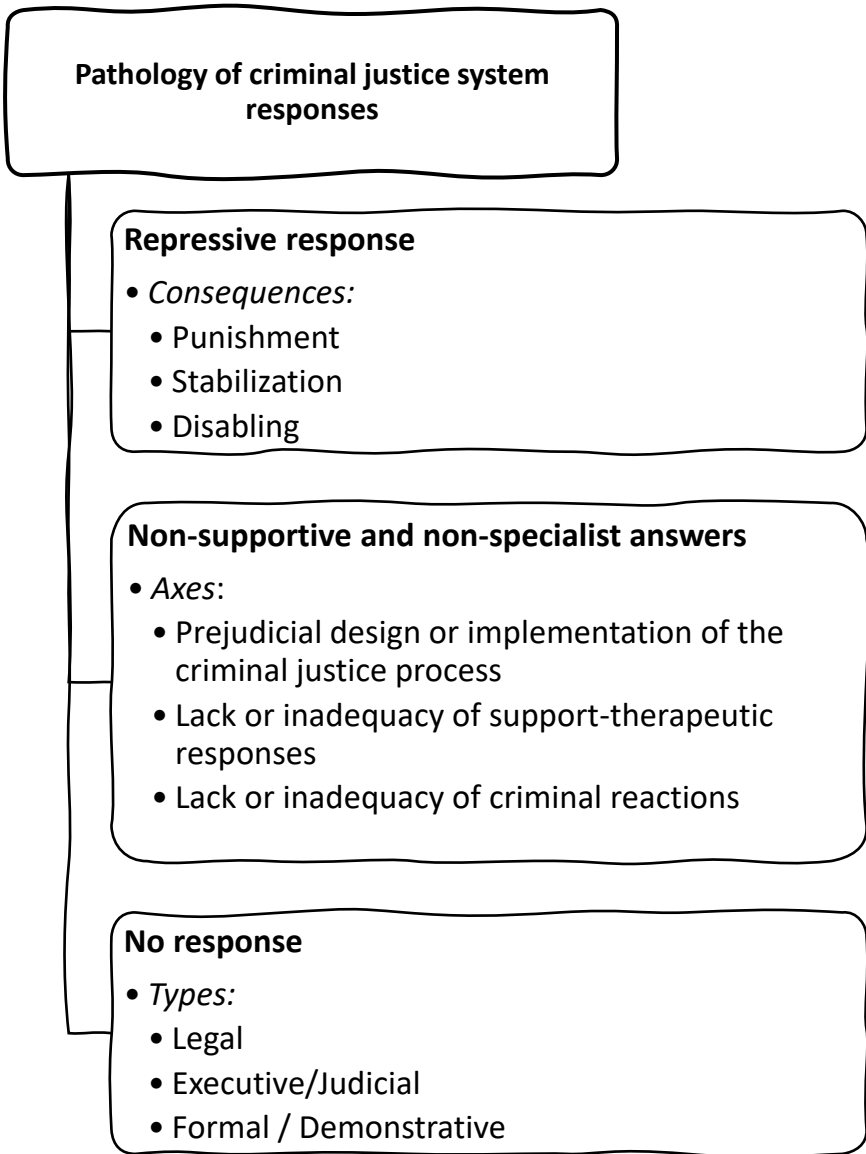


Figure 5 The Framework of the Criminal Justice System for Addressing the Harm to Sexual Abuse Victims (Irvanian, 2010: 21)

The findings of Kamali's research also indicate that sexual abuse, seen as a stain of shame, is a process that continues into the later stages of life. This signifies a need for addressing the oppressive, male-dominated, and unjust daily life structures in Iran. To reform this, cultural reformation mechanisms, adjustments to the social relations system, and changes in existing legal frameworks need to be critically reviewed (Kamali, 2010).

Reza Imam and others have revisited the arguments for the legitimacy of execution in one of the very important cases of sexual violence, namely incestuous adultery. They demonstrate that the evidence relied upon to justify execution does not meet the necessary criteria. In this research, the result obtained from examining the documents is the illegitimacy of execution. Moreover, a careful examination of the arguments made by proponents of execution reveals that the narratives and consensus lack the ability to prove the desired outcome. Furthermore, the absence of explicit mention of execution in the arguments has led to differences among jurists. External indicators that were cited by proponents of execution to strengthen the emergence of narratives had no impact on the desired outcome and were accompanied by criticisms. This was either due to the fact that they were flawed in terms of their authenticity or because they did not imply the desired outcome. Consensus, which is another document related to execution, was criticized both in terms of its minor aspect, namely its existence, and its major aspect, which is the legitimacy of execution. Therefore, by relying on authentic narratives, which proponents of execution themselves consider as their evidence, it can be concluded that the punishment for someone who commits adultery with their close relative is not execution; instead, other forms of punishment should be applied, whether it leads to their death or they remain alive. Similarly, if a woman willingly commits this crime, she should be punished in the same way (Reza Imam *et al.*, 2016).

Abassi Kalimani has also examined the jurisprudential and legal aspects of another significant type of violence, namely the abortion resulting from sexual assault. According to the

Criminal Procedure Law, necessary legal protections should be provided to the victim, including fair trial and compensation for their physical, emotional, and psychological damages. Prescribing abortion as a result of this relationship is not straightforward. Although some jurists have considered the termination of the foetus permissible based on jurisprudential principles such as the absence of harm, the prevention of harm to parents, legitimate self-defence, and so on, this contradicts the prevailing opinion among jurists. This is because it conflicts with the child's right to enjoy all human rights, including the right to life (before and after birth), regardless of race, colour, religion, birth origin, parental actions, and so on. It is impossible to deprive the child of their primary right to life due to violations of the law by parents or one of them (Abassi Kalimani, 2018).

Some other researchers have focused on the shortcomings of the healthcare and therapeutic support system for victims of sexual violence. Shali and colleagues, in a study titled 'Healthcare Providers' Experiences in Dealing with Sexual Violence Victims: A Qualitative Study,' have shown that clinical healthcare providers often attempt to follow administrative guidelines and standard forms without considering the care needs of female victims of sexual violence. Therefore, victims of sexual violence do not receive comprehensive healthcare services when they seek help at these centres. The results also indicate that one of the most significant problems in providing services to sexual assault victims is the lack of a centralized centre with standardized treatment protocols for providing healthcare services to women who are victims of sexual violence (Shali *et al.*, 2014).

Emi and Bishai have also examined the quality of healthcare for women who have experienced sexual assaults. The findings of this research indicate that the reported number of sexual assaults in the NHAMCS data is highly consistent with the number of reported forced sexual assaults by the federal research agency. The results demonstrate a statistically significant difference in patients who receive screening by age and also indicate that this difference exists for STD medications received. Calculating the difference in screening

and medications based on age does not fully explain why a significant portion of patients neither undergo screening nor receive STD medications. Researchers conclude that according to the guidelines of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, women do not receive complete complementary treatment. Emergency contraception prescriptions in the NHAMCS sample are fewer than in hospitals with sexual assault treatment programs that report emergency contraception prescriptions (Amey and Bishai, 2002).

In this context, Schönbucher and others have focused on sexual abuse of adolescents and examined adolescents' perspectives on social support after sexual abuse. Researchers have rarely investigated the quantity and quality of social support for those who have been sexually abused. In this study, interviews were conducted with 26 adolescents aged 15 to 18 years. The findings indicate that although adolescents considered parental support as the most essential form of support, they expressed greater satisfaction with peer support. Specifically, adolescents mentioned that they wished to receive more support from their parents to better cope with sexual abuse. Approximately half of the adolescents reported receiving counselling, which they found very helpful in dealing with the consequences of abuse. Only a few of them mentioned receiving support from school. When abuse occurs within the family, the victim's age is younger, the perpetrators are adults, and the sexual abuse is severe, all of which have a negative impact on perceived support. The findings of this study suggest that improving support for victims of sexual abuse is necessary. Preventing sexual abuse requires a focus on improving parents' responses to sexual abuse, facilitating access to professional support, and raising awareness among teachers about their crucial role in providing support to children who are victims of sexual abuse (Schönbucher *et al.*, 2014).

Institutional and individual backgrounds

Although it cannot be simply stated which backgrounds have played a more prominent role in the occurrence of child sexual abuse, it appears that psychologists have long been interested in the psychological and personality aspects of this

phenomenon more than researchers in other areas. The examination of the behavioural characteristics of victims and perpetrators within the framework of personality, as well as behavioural disorders and abnormalities such as addiction, has been one of the oldest topics of interest for psychologists in this field.

Khosravani and others (2012) conducted a study comparing different types of child abuse in normal individuals and addicts. Their research findings indicate a significant difference in the prevalence of physical, sexual, emotional, and neglectful child abuse between addicts and normal individuals, with addicts experiencing a higher rate of various forms of child abuse (Khosravani *et al.*, 2012: 235). Additionally, Qazizadeh and colleagues (2018) conducted a study titled 'A Conceptual Model of Background Factors in Marital Violence Against Women from the Perspective of Men' using a grounded theory approach to investigate this issue. According to the research findings, a central concept in this conceptual model is inappropriate marriage. Background factors include individual factors such as physiological and biological issues, addiction, personality disorders, and personality traits, all of which are considered influential factors in these cases (Qazizadeh *et al.*, 2018: 44).

Keshavarz Valian and Keshavarz Arshadi (2010) also mention the prevalence of learning disabilities as a background factor in this regard. According to their research, children with learning disabilities experience more abuse compared to normal children (Keshavarz Valian & Keshavarz Arshadi, 2010). In another study, Khademi and colleagues (2017) show that 32.3% of child abuse victims have mild mental disorders, 64.5% have moderate mental disorders, and 1.1% have severe mental disorders. The most commonly observed mental disorder in these individuals is depression and aggression. However, some researchers do not believe in personality and psychological differences among abused women.

For example, Maljoo (2010) in his research titled 'Incest: Backgrounds, Offender Strategies, and Victim Responses' shows that, in terms of personality and psychological traits, abused women in most of the examined samples did not have

specific psychological characteristics that would lead to sexual abuse. However, women who are not accepted by family members due to their specific gender or unwanted pregnancy, as well as women with mental abnormalities, are more likely to be sexually abused by family members compared to other women. Furthermore, some fathers who sexually abuse their daughters may exhibit personality and psychological traits such as low tolerance for failure, difficulty controlling anger, problems in establishing rapport with family members, verbal and physical aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety during sexual intercourse with adults, paedophilia, a history of childhood sexual abuse, and extreme suspicion towards family members (Maljoo, 2010).

According to attitudinal and personality scales, offenders have reported more gender role conflict, sexual conflicts, sexual compulsivity, loneliness, and sexual stereotype roles. They also report lower self-esteem and more feminine traits[3]. Men have reported a higher interest in child pornography compared to women (Freel, 1999).

Atefi and others in a study titled 'Experts' Perception of Personality Traits Influencing Individuals' Inclination Toward Child Abuse: A Phenomenological Study' used a phenomenological approach to investigate the personality traits of individuals who engage in child abuse from the perspective of experts in the field of mental and social health, such as psychologists, counsellors, and social workers. The findings of this research indicate four personality traits in these individuals in the form of antisocial tendencies, borderline tendencies, psychopathological tendencies, and paranoid tendencies (Atefi *et al.*, 2018: 97). These tendencies encompass 25 sub-themes, as shown in the table below:

Main Components	Secondary Components
Antisocial Tendencies	Self-centeredness, lack of conscience, absence of guilt feelings, lack of responsibility, impulsive behaviour, surface charm, deceit, lack of empathy.
Borderline Tendencies	Identity crisis, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social instability, impulsivity, self-harming, chronic emptiness.
Paranoid Tendencies	Excessive and unfounded pessimism, distrust of others, mental preoccupation with the dishonesty of others, perceiving others as untrustworthy.

Table 5 The main and secondary components of personality traits of child abusers (Atefi et al., 2018: 97)

Some studies have focused more on the behavioural characteristics of aggressors. Mohammad Khani and others (2010) examined the ‘relationship between sexual violence and attitudes toward marriage and the incidence of violence in marital relationships.’ Interviews were conducted with 230 couples using a sampling method. The findings of this study show that 60 out of 66 men with a history of physical assault (90.9%) and 68 out of 164 men without a history of physical assault (41%) reported sexual coercion. Of the 65 women with a history of physical assault, 62 (95.4%) and 68 out of 165 women without a history of physical assault (41%) reported sexual coercion. Of the 62 men with a history of psychological

violence, 57 (92%) and 58 out of 168 men without a history of psychological violence (34.5%) were also victims of sexual violence. Of the 60 women with a history of psychological violence, 58 (96.7%) and 72 out of 170 women without a history of psychological violence (42.4%) reported sexual coercion. It can be said that in cases of marital violence, when one violence is reported, one should expect other types of violence to occur (Mohammadkhani and others, 2010).

The findings of this study also show that female victims and non-victims of sexual coercion differed in their self-reported behavioural causality, expectation of improvement, and perceived ability to change the relationship at a micro-level. Female victims documented problems less in their own behaviour, estimated their ability to change the relationship and their expectation of relationship improvement lower than non-victim women. Experience of physical assault and psychological aggression is particularly associated with an increased likelihood of sexual coercion, especially among women. In female victims of sexual coercion, their documented behavioural causality, expectation of relationship improvement, and perceived ability to change the relationship were lower than non-victim women. According to these findings, the likelihood of experiencing sexual coercion increases if faced with other types of violence, especially among women, and dysfunctional attitudes toward marriage play a significant role in shaping and perpetuating marital violence (Mohammad Khani and others, 2010). Based on the results of Javan Jafari Bojnordi's research and others (2016), women who experienced family dysfunction in some way also experienced more victimization, both within and outside the family.

Sexual abuse consequences

Violence and sexual abuse, even if they occur only once in a person's life, are likely to have long-term effects on the lives of the affected individuals. Numerous studies have highlighted the effects and consequences of sexual violence on survivors, including the following: loss of trust in parents and family, anxiety, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), self-

harm, suicidal tendencies, depression, personality disorders, drug use, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, problems with maternal bonding or transitioning to motherhood, and psychological disorders (Mohammad Khani *et al.*, 2010).

Intrafamilial Mother-Child Sexual Abuse: This form of abuse damages the child's trust. Since children are dependent on their mothers' love and care, this type of abuse constitutes a double betrayal against them. Freel (1999) believes that sexual abuse leads to coercion, threats, harm to the child, and the erosion of trust in their parents, undermining their confidence and faith in the family. According to Halliburton *et al.*, sexual abuse by parents, especially mothers, causes trauma in children because the mother is the person they trust, and any form of violation is considered a betrayal. A review of the psychoanalytic literature reveals that only a few studies have focused on the sexual relationship or abuse between mother and child, despite it being an unknown phenomenon. In primitive societies, sexual abuse of children by women was prevalent and has been depicted by researchers in this field. The reality of a child being abused by their own mother has created specific issues for survivors. The shame and fear of disbelief experienced when the perpetrator is a woman, the unique sense of being unrecognized in incest by men, have created particular challenges that need to be addressed in therapies. Halliburton examines events related to intrafamilial sexual abuse through a review of the literature, which will be discussed below (Halliburton *et al.*, 2017).

In another study, Nahidi and colleagues examined the prevalence of anxiety among sexual assault survivors. The study population consisted of 93 female victims of sexual assault who sought medical services at the Legal Medicine Centre of Isfahan province. The findings indicate a significant positive correlation between sexual assault and anxiety, with a higher average prevalence of anxiety among individuals who had experienced sexual assault. Furthermore, 6.5% (6 individuals) reported mild anxiety, 81.7% (76 individuals) reported moderate anxiety, and 11.8% reported severe anxiety. Among the nine anxiety-related indicators, 51.6% of the participants experienced a constant sense of extreme fear,

49.5% (46 individuals) experienced heart palpitations, 39.8% (37 individuals) experienced sudden and unfounded fear, 29% (27 individuals) experienced terror, 24.7% (23 individuals) experienced intolerance, 17.2% (16 individuals) felt restless, 12.9% (12 individuals) experienced nightmares, and 4.3% (4 individuals) suffered from insomnia (Nahidi *et al.*, 2016).

Studies indicate that sexual abuse by women can harm the physical and emotional well-being of victims and disrupt effective interpersonal functioning, similar to sexual abuses by men. Vaheh Rahimpour and colleagues examined the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among women who reported sexual assault and sought medical services at legal clinics in Tehran. The results of this research show that the rate of PTSD among female victims of sexual assault in Tehran is 61.6 percent, which is a significant proportion (Vaheh Rahimpour *et al.*, 2014). Victims of both genders are susceptible to serious mental problems, such as self-harm, suicidal beliefs, depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and drug abuse. Similarly, a child may respond by distancing themselves, suppressing their emotions, or seeking refuge in other victims. Psychological dissociation can also occur as a result of trauma, although symptoms such as anxiety, phobias, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, and obsessive-compulsive behaviours may also manifest. Victims of such abuse often experience intensified feelings of shame and disgrace. Feelings of betrayal, expressed as anger and distrust, can result from incest, especially when the perpetrator is the child's mother. Other fundamental effects, such as significant difficulties in forming a sense of separation from the mother and an excessive need for maternal validation, can become so severe that they may lead to psychological disorders.

Despite some differences, there is limited information available regarding maternal abuse towards daughters. Some reports indicate that some of its effects, such as other forms of incest, are similar. Like paternal abuse of daughters, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness resulting from abuse predominate in victims. This includes fear, vulnerability, and a perceived need for control, which can sometimes lead to

identifying with the perpetrator and the potential for victimizing others. As a result, internalizing the negative actions of the perpetrator and an inescapable sense of shame often lead female victims of such abuse to experience different feelings, a sense of injury, and inadequacy. Being sexually abused by women, which society often views as unusual and unconventional, may further increase the likelihood of stigmatization and feelings of shame and guilt related to the abuse. Additionally, girls who have been abused by their mothers experience significant challenges, such as concerns about motherhood, fear of repeating incestuous acts, anxiety about their lack of knowledge regarding motherhood, and actively seeking support and guidance in child-rearing. However, whether there are differences in the apparent and hidden effects of maternal incest is still unclear. In contrast to girls who are sexually abused by their mothers, boys who are abused by their mothers often feel special, like an 'exception' and even 'the ruler of the world' (Margolis, 1977).

Many adolescent boys who initially perceive abuse as something positive often experience psychological impairment. They may turn to drug abuse, face difficulties in sexual relationships, and self-harm. In these cases, the child's psychological growth is often halted. This group of children also experiences psychosis, which is the loss of connection with reality accompanied by excessive anxiety about self-change. Other signs include identity confusion, perception problems, thought disorders, and changes in life experiences with others in the world. Personality dissociation and a loss of connection with reality are common in psychosis and dissociative disorders. Additionally, in psychosis, the ability to observe oneself and be aware of mental and emotional processes is also lost. Exposure to traumatic events such as rape is related to psychosis (Halliburton *et al.*, 2017: 13-409).

Antfolk *et al.* have indirectly explored the potential consequences of sexual violence in the context of incest. In their research *Disgust Elicited by Third-Party Incest: Roles of Biologic, Cohabitation, and Familial Relationships*, they argue that at the highest level, the explanation for disgust toward incestuous behaviour is linked to the costs of inbreeding.

However, there is limited information available about how the disgust toward incestuous behaviour, as proposed to reduce interest in mating with close relatives, is influenced by factors related to evolutionary and biological cognition, as well as genetics. Since disgust is suggested as a mechanism to deter mating with close relatives, the researchers in this study have examined how gender, biological relationships, cohabitation, and the type of familial relationships depicted in scenarios of incest mediate this relationship. The findings of this study indicate that women are more disgusted by incestuous behaviour than men. Biological descriptions of incestuous behaviour elicit more disgust than social-legal descriptions. Additionally, descriptions of incestuous behaviour among family members living together generate more disgust compared to incestuous behaviour between relatives who do not cohabit. The conclusion of this study is that changes in the level of disgust toward incestuous behaviour are consistent with evolutionary hypotheses regarding the avoidance of sexual relationships with close relatives (Antfolk *et al.*, 2012).

Strategies of Sexual Abuse

A significant portion of research in the field of sexual abuse is dedicated to investigating the topic of sexual abuse strategies. Coping strategies of survivors and the strategies employed by perpetrators are subjects that are prominently evident in many studies in this field. Below, we will discuss some of these strategies.

Coping strategies of survivors

Turning to Religion or Spirituality as a Refuge: Religion has been able to serve several functions for this group of women in overcoming their difficulties. These women expressed that their religion or church played a significant role in creating a support network of individuals who could interact with them. This support network helped them interpret the experience of abuse in a way that allowed them to free themselves from self-blame and guilt. Additionally, their faith or spiritual experience gave them the belief to continue living, find meaning in their lives, and have a purpose. One of the women mentioned that her faith was beneficial to her because it helped

her believe that God would provide something better for her. Another one said, 'I believe we can overcome anything that life throws our way, and God has helped me in this way.' Others stated that their faith helped them believe in their worth and purpose in life, so they believed they could overcome this experience (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993).

External Blame Documents and Other Document Styles: Women mentioned that understanding what happened to them in childhood was difficult. Some said that these events did not make sense to them at all. Others thought that the abuse was natural and a way to express love. Some felt that what they were doing was wrong; however, over time, they could recognize that it wasn't their fault, they were victims, and the individuals who perpetrated the abuse were to blame. Most women stated that they eventually understood that those who abused them were 'sick,' 'perpetrators,' 'offenders,' and 'paedophiles/child lovers.' Nevertheless, some said that they realized in their youth that they had no connection to that event. It had just happened to them for them to become victims, and the individuals who had abused them were 'insane' (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993).

Hope for the Future: Some women displayed notable document styles. For example, they could see the situation and tell themselves, 'This will change. It won't always be like this. Someday, I can move past this event.' They were able to envision a future free from abuse and maltreatment. One woman said, 'I knew it would eventually end, and I could talk about it' (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993).

Change in Perspective: Another ability demonstrated by this group of women was the capacity to see abuse from a particular perspective. They acknowledged that abuse had affected them but didn't necessarily impact everything they did. One woman said, 'I could view abuse as a slice of life. Like a bad slice, like a worm in an apple; but it doesn't completely take me down' (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993).

Belief in Personal Power and the Ability to Say No: Some of these women expressed that they recognized their personal power early in life. One woman said, 'Eventually, I realized I

could say no to my father.’ Another stated, ‘I finally figured out I could say enough.’ Others mentioned that finding personal power came later in life and empowered them to take steps like leaving home, setting boundaries, reducing interaction with people, going to university, and more. This inner sense of control and feeling of power still shines through statements like ‘I believe people can do whatever they want if they’re determined’ and ‘This is me deciding what I’m going to do in my life.’ Many women said, ‘Taking control of my life was one of the biggest decisions I made.’ ‘Finally, I started listening to my inner voice and received answers that helped me.’ It seems that this sense of control and power has helped these women perform well in school during their childhood, overcome their fears, and achieve small successes along the way.

The Ability to Find Supportive Relationships Outside the Family: Participants in this study demonstrated that building supportive relationships outside the family is crucial for overcoming the experiences of sexual abuse. They mentioned that friends and examples of healthy individuals and families in their surroundings helped them feel supported and provided them with role models for their actions. They stated that the support of others and having someone who believed in them and trusted them helped them believe in themselves. These supports often stemmed from places like schools and churches, which often led to good marriages. According to these women, getting married was one of the best decisions they made in their lives. One woman said, ‘Good relationships and support from others were the most important things that helped me overcome the bitter experiences of sexual abuse.’ Others stated, ‘My marriage was the most important decision in my life, and working on it was the most important thing I’ve done’ or ‘Having someone who believed in me made all the difference’ (Valentine & Finauer, 1993).

Silence: In this strategy, the victim had neither the ability to object nor the option to escape. The major reasons for silence included hope for a better future, embarrassment or shame, fear of being pointed at, being perceived as the wrongdoer, losing the abuser (father or brother), and the fear of retaliatory actions (Maljoo, 2010).

Resistance: This is a strategy in which girls have tried to prevent repeated sexual abuse and have also attempted to distance themselves from multiple pressures. Girls have used tactics such as shouting, avoiding the abuser, taking baths when the abuser is not at home, being accompanied by others, locking themselves in, resisting, and similar measures (Maljoo, 2010).

Protest: Among the victims, there has been limited protest, but in some cases where the abuse continued for an extended period, they resorted to protest. When a victim had support networks, they were more likely to turn to their support network (Maljoo, 2010).

Exit: This strategy has been the last resort for girls, and it has taken forms such as leaving home, getting married, or even attempting suicide. When the victim lacks social support networks, they are more likely to resort to this strategy (Maljoo, 2010).

Psychological Adaptation: Wang and Heppner conducted a qualitative study examining the experiences of survivors of child sexual abuse in Taiwan. The results of this study indicate that survivors' optimal recovery from sexual abuse is facilitated by a complex process of mutual relationships (such as self-evaluation and evaluation of others) embedded in their cultural and social backgrounds, as well as cultural values. While there are commonalities among survivors of child sexual abuse, the findings of this study demonstrate a highly variable coping process within and among survivors. They propose the following model for the coping process. As the model illustrates, three cultural, social, relational, and self domains with their respective characteristics are crucial for effective coping with child sexual abuse and overcoming its experienced consequences.

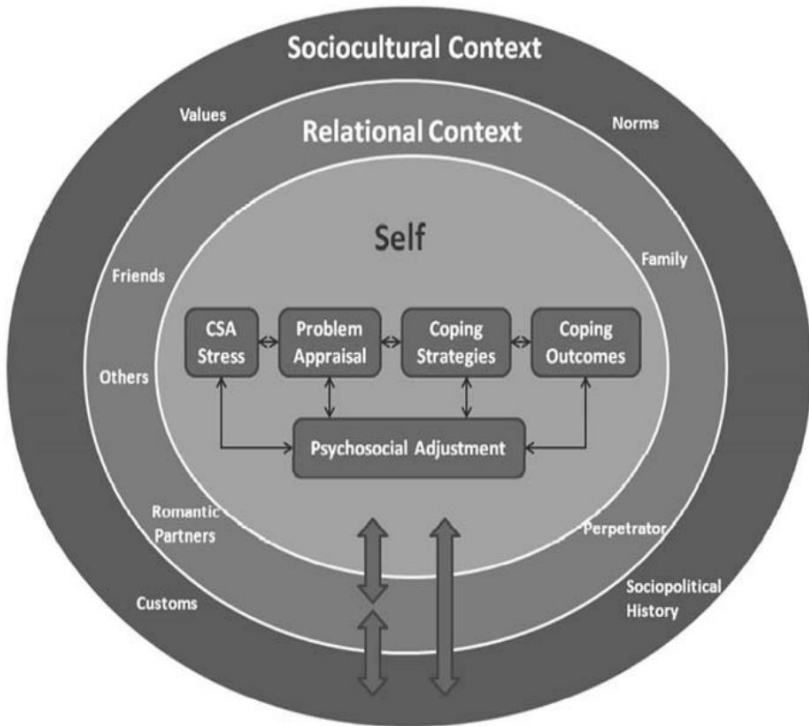


Figure 6 The ecological-relational model of coping with child sexual abuse (Wang and Heppner; 2011)

Strategies of perpetrators

Coercion and Physical Violence: In this method, the perpetrator, which in this context is the father of the girls, sexually abuses them through the use of physical violence.

Emotional Manipulation and Psychological Intimidation: In this strategy, the father exchanges affection for his child with sexual relations in a way that some of the girls come to believe that the only way to gain his love is to become a victim of his sexual abuse.

Economic Strategy: In this strategy, the perpetrator uses tactics such as providing money and resources.

Deceptive Strategy: In this strategy, the abusers deceive their victims. It is possible that the perpetrator may use multiple strategies simultaneously for their abuse (Maljoo, 2010).

Summary and Critical Reflection on the Background of Research

The studies reviewed have shed light on various forms of sexual violence experiences across different cultures and societies. These forms of violence are global phenomena and are not limited to a specific geographical region, although the prevalence and types may vary from one society to another. Children and women are the primary victims of such violence, despite over two decades passing since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the participation of many countries in it. We still witness a widespread incidence of child abuse worldwide. Additionally, boys and men also experience violence, and in some cases, women appear as perpetrators. Since children are less capable of defending themselves, they naturally face a wider range of consequences. The consequences of this phenomenon are much more severe for women, even in cases where women are victims, they may face the harshest forms of punishment, including honour killings, as evidence suggests. This summary provides an overview of the research findings and highlights the persistent and global nature of sexual violence. It also underscores the disproportionate impact on children and women and the grave consequences they may face.

Children and women experience a wide spectrum of sexual violence. However, the experience of violence is not evenly distributed across social strata and is clustered based on certain characteristics such as poverty, dysfunctional families, or patriarchal societies or communities. A review of empirical studies in this area has shown that sexual abuse has various dimensions. This issue can be studied in terms of its prevalence, causes, characteristics of perpetrators and victims, consequences of sexual violence, societal reactions to it, support and treatment systems, legal aspects, and pathways to recovery.

One notable aspect of sexual violence, especially rape and incest, is that due to the taboo nature of these phenomena in society, they often go unreported, exacerbating the harm suffered by victims. In many cases, victims refrain from reporting these incidents due to fear of stigmatization and a lack of social and legal support. It's important to note that not only men commit sexual violence; women may also engage in violence against men, and in some cases, women may perpetrate violence against men, including their own children.

Regarding the aetiology of sexual violence, we can observe a wide range of causes at different levels, including societal, communal, family, and individual characteristics of the perpetrator and victim. It's important to emphasize that the causes of different forms of sexual violence may vary, but this does not mean that there are no underlying or common causes. In fact, these causes do exist, and the aim of this section is to address these causes.

At the macro or societal level, several factors play a role in accelerating sexual violence. According to the studies reviewed, one of these factors is poverty. Poverty can lead to sexual violence against children in several ways. In many cases, poverty results in child abuse through neglect, meaning that families are unable to adequately meet their children's needs and develop their skills. In this process, children's skills do not develop well, and as they grow older, they may struggle to establish proper communication skills with the opposite gender. Moreover, being impoverished means they may not have the ability to get married or access other legitimate channels to meet their needs, which can potentially lead to resorting to violence.

Poverty also leads to a decrease in awareness of proper parenting skills among parents. In many cases, parents may employ inappropriate parenting styles, including violence and abuse, to raise their children. Additionally, impoverished children and women enter professions that put them at greater risk of sexual violence. Working on the streets, in the metro, urban spaces, remote areas, workshops, informal jobs, using public transportation, and being in vulnerable locations are all circumstances that can exacerbate violence against them.

Furthermore, poverty is closely linked to child labour. In other words, poverty is a primary driver of child labour. During work, children may experience various forms of violence, including sexual violence, from their colleagues or other individuals. Another contributing factor is residing in neighbourhoods and areas that are socially disorganized. These areas, characterized by poverty, residential instability, and vulnerable spaces, tend to have higher rates of sexual violence, such as harassment and assault. It's important to note that sexual violence is not exclusive to lower socioeconomic classes; it exists at all economic levels, but it is more prevalent among the impoverished.

Another factor at the societal level is patriarchy, which has been justified and perpetuated by various ideologies, such as religion. In patriarchal societies, women and children are deprived of their rights, and it is these men who determine their fate. For example, child marriage and sexual relations, which are common in such marriages, constitute a form of abuse. This is often decided by these parents, especially the fathers of these children. In some cases, men believe they have the right to sexually abuse their daughters or relatives because they perceive them as their property or tools. In other situations where women engage in sexual relationships or become victims of abuse, they may face severe punishment from men, as these men seek to restore their lost honour through such punishment.

At the family level, factors such as dysfunctional families, authoritarian families, isolated families, and families with unhealthy marital attitudes can accelerate sexual violence or child sexual abuse. These forms of violence can occur both within and outside the family. For example, in families where children live with stepfathers and stepmothers, the likelihood of sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence by stepfathers and stepmothers is higher. Additionally, in dysfunctional families, such as single-parent families, female-headed households, large families, and families where children live with stepfathers and stepmothers, the reduced sense of attachment, support, social supervision, and care increases the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence within and outside

the family. Moreover, in authoritarian families where there is an imbalanced relationship between parents and children, coupled with possessive attitudes in father-child relationships, the likelihood of sexual violence, including rape, is higher.

Some personal characteristics of both perpetrators and victims also accelerate violence. In terms of the characteristics of perpetrators, these include low tolerance for failure, difficulties in anger control, a lack of empathy with family members, verbal and physical aggression, drug abuse, anxiety during sexual relations with adults, paedophilia or child attraction, a history of childhood sexual abuse, extreme suspicion of family members, anti-social tendencies, borderline personality, paranoia, sexual impulsivity, loneliness, gender role stereotyping, low self-esteem, emotional congruence, inhibition and restraint problems, impulsivity, suppression, and mental health issues. Notably, drug abuse, which is prevalent in Iran, plays a significant role. Drug abuse can lead to sexual violence in two ways. Firstly, when individuals consume drugs such as methamphetamine or excessive alcohol, they may lose control and engage in violence, including sexual violence. Secondly, in some cases, addicted individuals may provide their children and wives to drug dealers in exchange for drugs, allowing these dealers to sexually exploit them (see Saadatifar, 2019).

Some social and individual characteristics of victims, such as being immigrants, being at specific ages (childhood and adolescence), women with a history of unwanted pregnancies, women with mental disorders, children with learning disabilities, and women with low education and awareness, are more likely to experience sexual violence. Firstly, this group of women and children are more likely to be marginalized. Secondly, they are less capable of defending themselves, making them more vulnerable to experiencing sexual violence.

Another dimension of the experience of violence is the consequences individuals face. Studies that were reviewed have listed various consequences, such as experiencing the burning stigma of social disgrace and rejection, encountering psychological disorders like stress, psychosis, anxiety, depression, phobias, aggression, and nervous disorders,

experiencing personality disorders, continuous mistreatment of children, aversion to the spouse, a tendency towards divorce, aversion to men, shame and fear of disbelief, coercion or threats, harm to children and the loss of their trust in parents and family, suicidal thoughts and attempts, drug abuse, escape, sleep problems, eating disorders, and obsessive behaviours, feelings of shame and fear, feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, feelings of detachment from parents, an excessive need to return to the mother for validation, self-harm or self-infliction have been reported. However, these consequences may vary depending on who the perpetrator and victim are, meaning whether the perpetrator is male or female, a father or mother, a sibling, or an adult, whether the victim is a child or an adult, a girl or a boy. Other studies conducted in Iran have listed various negative consequences for the experience of violence by children. Consequences such as delinquency and running away from home (Kargari, 2007; Kamrani Fakour, 2006), depression, mania, reactive behaviour disorders, academic decline, drug abuse disorders, smoking or hookah use problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, various personality disorders, and more (Rezaee & Ahmadian, 2014), subsequent use of violence (Zare Shahabadi & Nadarpour, 2014), marital incompatibility (Amiri Majd & Kakavand, 2018), low quality of life (Talebpassand & Safaie, 2013), social isolation, feelings of hatred and resentment, humiliation, guilt, anger, loneliness, grief, and self-blame (Vaezi, 2016).

One more dimension of the experience of sexual violence is the response of the individual, society, and support institutions to it. Evidence has shown that individuals who possess greater resilience and resources, such as social support, can better overcome the consequences of the experience of sexual violence and return to normal life. In other words, social support, in the form of social networks, enhances the resilience of individuals. In many cases, society's response to the victim is rejection, and the individual feels the burning stigma. Evidence has shown that there are no appropriate treatments and therapeutic protocols available to victims of sexual abuse, and the law does not adequately support the victims. Iranian

studies have well demonstrated the reactions of legal and social institutions towards the affected individuals (Iranvanian, 2019).

Chapter Two: The Lived Experience of Sexual Violence

Introduction

Sexual abuse in human societies is pervasive and enduring. Despite its prevalence, it is also considered an elusive subject for scientific investigation. This elusiveness is not due to the incapacity of science to study the phenomenon but rather because of the difficulty in accessing individuals who are reluctant to cooperate with researchers in this field. To a considerable extent, this challenge stems from the transformation of sexual abuse into a taboo subject, which creates difficulties for both the survivor and the perpetrator. It seems that the issue of sexual abuse has an impenetrable core, and exploring it requires going beyond conventional methods and approaches used in the study of social phenomena.

The secrecy surrounding this phenomenon is even more pronounced in traditional societies like Iran, making its examination necessitate more complex cognitive strategies. Most research conducted on this topic has also been unable to penetrate the inner world of survivors and perpetrators for the reasons mentioned. Nevertheless, the breadth and depth of the damage caused by sexual abuse are so significant that we cannot remain indifferent to it. However, addressing this distressing phenomenon requires the formulation of a social policy that, on the one hand, sensitively recognizes the various manifestations of this phenomenon and, on the other hand, encompasses effective strategies to combat it.

This necessitates the formulation of a theory based on real and empirical evidence. Understanding this phenomenon requires, on one hand, gaining the trust of survivors and perpetrators and, on the other hand, becoming familiar with the perceptions and meanings these individuals have of their experiences. Such characteristics can be explored using qualitative methods, particularly in the grounded theory research approach, commonly known in Iran as GT. This research has adopted this

method and will briefly review the existing literature on this research approach.

Given that this research aims to study and identify the various backgrounds and consequences of different forms of sexual violence against children and present a final theory, the research methodology employed here is based on qualitative research methods. Accordingly, the grounded theory approach, GT, has been utilized for conducting the research. This method, with the techniques and tools it provides to researchers, can effectively examine the causes, experiences, strategies, and outcomes of the phenomenon under study, namely child sexual violence, and ultimately propose a grounded theory or model of the studied phenomenon.

Glaser and Strauss have defined grounded theory as a theory extracted comprehensively from the data collected during the research process (Glaser and Corbin, 1968).

In the grounded theory approach, the methods of data collection, generation, analysis, and the resulting theory are closely interconnected and multidimensional. For example, although data collection and generation, as well as data analysis, initially take place in the early stages, it is possible to return to data collection even after constructing the theory to enrich the theory further. As Iman has pointed out, researchers in this approach are engaged in constructing and creating theory while studying actors involved in similar processes and actions.

What occurs during the process of theory construction regarding the phenomenon or subject under study is a 'kind of inference and abstraction from a specific and distinct process' that has captured the researcher's attention (Iman, 2018: 32-33).

Sampling and sample size in qualitative studies are topics that continue to be debated. However, many argue that the goal of sampling in qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Bronz and Grov, 2021), not to make generalizations. In general, qualitative research findings are not obtained through statistical processes, and these types of studies are typically devoid of pre-determined theoretical

frameworks and hypotheses. Given the limited scope of the subjects under study, the findings are by no means generalizable to a larger population (Sadeghi Fasaee, 2014a). In qualitative research, the logic of sampling is also qualitatively and based on the principle of theoretical saturation when determining the sample size.

To achieve an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon, purposeful or purposive sampling is utilized (Bourns, 2000). As Patton (1990) states: The logic and power of purposeful sampling are based on selecting cases that are information-rich for in-depth, rich, and significant studies (p. 169). According to Polkinghorne (1989), 'qualitative research is inquiry aimed at describing and clarifying human experience as it appears in people's lives'. Thus, the first condition for selecting a participant in qualitative research is that the participant has experienced the study's subject. The second condition is that this individual is capable of providing a rich and accurate description of their experience.

In qualitative research, researchers determine sample adequacy by applying the principle of theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation represents the stage in qualitative research where the data collected is deemed sufficient for analysis and final reporting. This point is reached when additional discussions with new samples fail to contribute new insights to the researcher's comprehension of the phenomenon under study, signifying that a comprehensive dataset has been compiled and is considered complete.

Qualitative data analysis is conducted through the process of coding the data. Researchers, after transcribing the conducted interviews, carefully examine them and then begin the coding process. Coding is done in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Overall, qualitative data analysis through coding is a systematic process that allows researchers to extract meaning from raw data, identify patterns, and develop a conceptual framework for interpreting and explaining the research findings.

Open Coding: Open coding involves breaking down the data into separate meaningful units related to the

study's subject and transforming them into concepts and labels based on their similarities and differences with other concepts and labels assigned to other data. Naming and conceptualizing the data are the initial steps in open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 2013, p. 63). Concepts are considered the building blocks of grounded theory. In open coding, the intention is to transform data and phenomena into concepts. Initially, data is separated, and expressions are categorized based on meaningful units to add concepts to them (Flick, 2008, p. 330). Open coding is the analytical process through which identified concepts and their features and dimensions in the data are discovered (Lee, 2001, p. 49). In this stage, grounded theory data analysis provides initial information about the phenomenon under study by segmenting information. The researcher places concepts on all collected data, such as interviews, observations, events, or self-notes (Creswell, 2005, p. 397).

Axial Coding: Axial coding involves relating sub-concepts to more central concepts. In essence, by defining concepts and categories, the open coding phase concludes. In this stage, the researcher must arrange the 'categories' obtained through open coding in a logical structure and specify their relationships with each other. In other words, the segmented data into concepts and categories in axial coding must be linked together in a new way. This process has been carried out using a paradigm model, including 'conditions,' 'phenomenon,' 'context,' 'intervening conditions,' and 'consequences' (Strauss and Corbin, 2013, p. 100). This coding is called 'axial' because coding revolves around the 'axis' of a central concept (Lee, 2001, p. 49). In this stage, concepts, features, and dimensions

resulting from open coding are developed and put in place to create an increasing understanding of relationships (Lee, 2001, p. 49).

Selective Coding: Selective coding, in Strauss and Corbin's interpretation, is what Glaser refers to as 'the emergence of theory.' Selective coding, based on the results of open coding and axial coding, is the primary stage of theory development. It systematically links the central concept to other concepts and presents these relationships within a narrative. It also revises concepts that require further improvement and development.

In all types of research, including qualitative studies, ethical considerations play a crucial role. Ethical guidelines are established to regulate the interactions between researchers and the individuals or fields they intend to study. Research ethics principles pose the question of whether researchers have taken precautions to avoid harming participants by respecting their needs, interests, and benefits during the research process or not. These ethical guidelines stipulate that research should be based on informed consent (participants must willingly agree to participate based on the information provided by the researcher). They also mandate that research should refrain from causing harm to participants. This principle includes safeguarding their privacy and not deceiving them about the research's objectives (Flick, 2012). Some of the most important ethical principles, which have also been at the forefront of this research, include:

Non-violation and Avoidance of Harm during Data Collection: Researchers must refrain from causing harm to participants. To achieve this, during interviews, if participants ever expressed dissatisfaction with a question or showed reluctance to answer, the interviewer would leave the question unanswered and proceed to the next one. If the interviewer had no intention to continue the interview, despite the participant's explanation and lack of persuasion, they would abstain from further interviewing.

Autonomy: The values and decisions of participants must be respected. To ensure this, interviews were conducted in a manner that avoided any value orientation, and ideally, the interviewer refrained from displaying any value-based reactions even in response to the interviewee's expressions of opinion.

Justice: All individuals should be treated equally: In this study, all interviewees were considered to have equal value for the researcher, and every effort was made during interviews to uphold the dignity and rights of the interviewees, avoiding harm to them, and seeking the consent of all interviewees. In this process, attempts were made to ensure fairness.

Dignity and Rights of Participants: Safeguarding their dignity and rights, and obtaining their consent voluntarily through providing sufficient information are crucial. Furthermore, researchers must ensure that the participants' identities remain completely confidential, and their information is used in a way that prevents others from identifying them. No entity should exploit this information against the interests of the participants. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer has provided explanations about confidentiality and non-disclosure of information to the interviewees. The recording of their voices was subject to their consent. In other words, whenever they did not wish to have their voices recorded, the interviewer did not record it and relied solely on note-taking during the interview.

Informed Consent: Accepting the principle of informed consent as a prerequisite for the participation of individuals in the research, it should be noted that all interviewees were interviewed with their informed consent.

Some researchers, influenced by the early statements of Glaser and Strauss (1967), believe that there is no need for a review of existing literature in qualitative research. They even emphasize that such a practice should be avoided in qualitative research. The founders of the grounded theory later acknowledged and amended their claims in this regard, stating that both technical and non-technical literature should be used for a more precise understanding of the subject. This is because it has assisted

researchers in developing a grounded theory model and addressing research questions (Strauss and Corbin, 2013: 153). Aside from this, reviewing existing works on the research topic will help the researcher become more sensitive and allow for targeted data collection by accessing some sensitive concepts emerging from the review of existing literature. This research adopts such an approach in examining the literature on sexual abuse and research methods.

Since the primary aim of a qualitative research literature review is to sensitize the researcher to capture information related to the research objectives, the goal of this research in reviewing definitions, instances, explanations, and clarifications of sexual violence is not necessarily to provide a comprehensive definition, a definitive framework, or an exhaustive theoretical framework. Instead, it aims to raise further theoretical sensitivities within the conceptual framework that can be extracted from the provided definitions and theories.

Qualitative research does not commit to an exhaustive review of the literature under study because, according to cognitive method recommendations, literature review in qualitative research only extends to the point where it enhances the researcher's theoretical sensitivity. According to Zenobia and colleagues, the examination of the literature on the issue should continue to the extent that it motivates further research and justifies the research design (Kermani, 2018: 81). Strabert and Carpenter (2013) also claim that qualitative research generally does not start with an extensive review of resources. The tangible outcome and benefit of reviewing the literature in a GT research is the acquisition of several theoretically sensitizing tools, referred to as 'sensitive concepts.'

However, the study's target population comprises all individuals with experiences of any form of sexual abuse during their childhood, meaning individuals who were subjected to abuse at the age of 18 or younger. The sample size or the number of individuals interviewed in this research is 452.

We employed a combination of snowball and purposive sampling methods. We initially selected participants who met our specific criteria (purposive), and then asked these participants to recommend others who might be suitable for the study (snowball). This approach allowed us to reach a diverse range of participants while ensuring they all met the necessary characteristics for our research objectives. After interviewing some abused individuals or experts in this field, they were asked if they knew anyone who had experienced sexual abuse or had expertise in this area and could be introduced for an interview. Additionally, virtual spaces such as social networks and chat rooms were utilized to find abused individuals and conduct interviews with them. To preserve personal privacy, the full and real names of the interviewees were never disclosed, and at the request of many participants, information about experts was not included in this research, and in some cases, names were changed.

The purposive sampling method was also used for some cases who had specific experiences or knowledge. For instance, given that men or boys are less inclined to be interviewed in this area and share their experiences for various reasons, an effort was made to talk to some of them who had experienced abuse during childhood using purposive sampling.

To collect research data, a semi-structured interview method was utilized. For data analysis, the researcher initially seeks a comprehensive understanding of the interviews by transcribing and thoroughly studying them. To analyse the data, the Strauss and Corbin coding process was employed. This process begins with open coding, which involves labelling the interview text. In the next step, all labels or concepts that are similar in some way are grouped around a central theme. To achieve this, the coding process starts with the initial interviews, where labels are assigned to interview concepts. After several interviews have been coded in this manner, the concepts are prepared for axial coding, at which point the main themes are identified. As Strauss and Corbin have noted, this analytical process is inductive, and research concepts and themes evolve from concrete to abstract or from parts to wholes (Strauss and Corbin, 2014).

The studies and theories reviewed in this research have shown that various factors at different levels of society, including individual, social, and family levels, contribute to some individuals resorting to violence. Additionally, certain characteristics of the victims make them more susceptible to violence. Reflecting on the literature on sexual violence indicates that in our research quest, we should look for signs and threads in the extensive qualitative data at hand. We should also consider from which perspectives and through which concepts previous researchers have approached data exploration in similar studies. These expressions, labelled as sensitive concepts, will guide us in this research inquiry. In the table below, the most significant sensitive concepts, classified based on their characteristics, are presented:

Category	Factors
<i>Society</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patriarchy - Gender inequality norms - Laws and societal norms supporting violence - Sexual norms favouring male dominance - Weak laws against sexual violence - Weak policies promoting gender equality - High levels of crime and other forms of violence - Low value placed on women’s work - Lack of legitimate avenues for sexual fulfilment for all members of society - Economic pressures
<i>Neighbourhood</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of support for mothers - Poverty linked to male identity crises and lack of opportunities - Lack of institutional support from police and the legal system - Tolerance of sexual violence in society - Lenient societal punishments against sexual offenders
<i>Family</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Large families - Dysfunctional families (conflict and disruption in family relationships) - Single-parent families or those with stepchildren - Lack of interference by other institutions due to the protection of privacy - Inappropriate marriages

Category	Factors
<i>Interpersonal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Association with sexually aggressive and criminal peers - Living in a family environment with violence and limited resources - Extreme family patriarchy - Limited emotional support within the family - Family's emphasis on honour and security relative to the victim's well-being - Lack of social control
<i>Perpetrator</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Genetic predispositions - Personality disorders - Low self-control - Narcissism - Drug abuse - Coercive sexual fantasies and other beliefs supporting sexual violence - Preference for impersonal sexual relationships - Hostility towards women - History of sexual violence - Paedophilia or child sexual attraction - Antisocial, borderline, paranoid, or psychotic traits - Sexual compulsivity, isolation, and sexual role stereotyping - Low self-esteem and psychological problems
<i>Victim</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Types of daily activities - Use of drugs and alcohol - Poverty - Youth - History of violence such as rape - Re-victimization - Failure to report experiences of violence - Women who have experienced unwanted pregnancies - Children born as a result of unwanted pregnancies - Women with mental disabilities - Children with learning disabilities - Illiterate women with low awareness

Table 6 Critical concepts as developed in this research

This table summarizes all the factors discussed in the previous sections that contribute to sexual violence in various categories.

Categorization of Child Sexual Abuse

Forms of abuse

In the previous chapter, various classifications regarding the forms of child abuse were presented. Abuse takes on different forms, and we encounter a wide spectrum of abuse categories. Based on this, abuses can be summarized into three main categories. One category includes those that involve penetration, such as rape. Another category includes abuses that engage children in sexual activities without penetration, such as fondling, kissing, touching, and genital contact. Finally, the third category indirectly involves children in abuse, such as hearing or witnessing sexual relations between parents or parents with others in the context of infidelity or any other type of relationship.

In the following, we refer to the forms of sexual abuse identified through interviews in this research. Before presenting them, it should be noted that the interviewees were divided into two groups: individuals who experienced childhood abuse and experts/narrators in this field.

The identified forms of abuse in the study include: incestuous abuse, vaginal or anal penetration, oral sexual acts resembling penetration, sexual assault, fondling, fingering, witnessing parental and others' sexual relations, observing others' self-gratification, physical touching, coercing into watching pornography, child marriage involving sexual relations, genital touching, placing genitalia on a child's body, exhibitionism, masturbation, sexual exploitation through trafficking, kissing, and nudity.

In continuation, we refer to the forms of sexual harassment that were identified in this study through the experience of the interviewees. Before presenting them, it should be stated that a group of interviewees were people who were raped as children and another group were experts and narrators in this field. The forms identified in the research were: sexual assault, vaginal or anal penetration, penetrative oral sex, sexual assault, caressing, fingering, observing the sex of parents and others, observing the self-pleasure of others, bad touch, forcing

to watch porn movies, pornography, sex in the form of child concubine, rubbing the genitals, placing the penis in the child's genitals such as between his legs, exposing the nakedness, groping, sexual abuse in the form of being sold, being kissed and getting naked.

In certain instances, a child may endure multiple forms of abuse simultaneously. The spectrum of abuse can range from caressing and touching to ultimately culminate in rape. Within this framework, the experiences of children are examined. At one extreme, we encounter rape, which can be perpetrated by intimate partners or any other individual. Another form of sexual violation includes child marriage, which is often considered a form of rape.

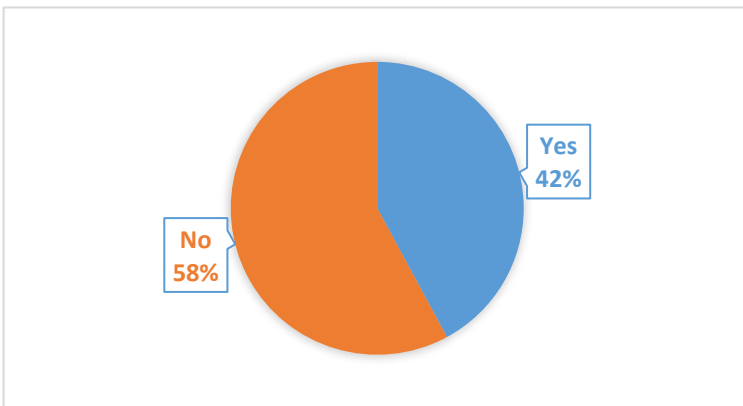


Figure 7 Distribution of respondents according to the experience of oral, anal or vaginal penetration

A social worker and an activist specializing in social issues have shared the following account regarding one of their clients who sought assistance due to difficulties in their marital relationship:

The first person who subjected the client to abuse was the client's paternal cousin, who happened to be of the same gender. Initially, this cousin acted as a caregiver for the client's mother. However, she engaged in a sexual relationship with the client herself, causing significant harm. For example, she would say things

like, 'You should do this for me,' or 'Let's go somewhere private,' and initiated sexual acts in the client's presence when the client was in the fourth and fifth grades. She satisfied herself and then compelled the client to participate, claiming that's when she herself experienced pleasure.

This case was initially brought to light by the first abuser, a woman who exhibited psychological consequences and behavioural signs affecting the child. Subsequently, a second abuser, the maternal cousin's son, who also happened to be a private tutor for the client, engaged in a relationship with her, ostensibly involving mutual consent and pleasure. The most crucial aspect is that this relationship occurred during the client's adolescent years, coinciding with her sexual awakening.

Adolescence is a transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, and in today's Iranian society, due to the limited awareness of this stage, it is often characterized by misunderstandings and uncertainties. One of these misunderstandings involves the failure of families and society to distinguish between childhood and adolescence. Consequently, adolescents grapple with identity issues and negative emotions such as fear, anger, anxiety, lack of trust, and insecurity due to the interactive environment they experience.

Sexual abuse during adolescent stage can be significantly more damaging and lead to the persistence and intensification of these issues and emotions. In a way, it solidifies the individual's ambiguous status both personally and socially, hindering their progression to subsequent stages and impeding their personal and social development.

In this section, we will review and examine some of the accounts and experiences related to this category of abuses. An expert, identified as Ms. B, has stated:

The second case reported is about a 7-year-old girl, as reported by her mother. Meaningful sexual touching

had been happening from the father since she was one and a half years old. The child's private parts were touched by the father.

Several noteworthy points are highlighted in this case report. Firstly, the child has endured abuse from the father over an extended period, much like some other cases, suggesting that longer durations of such relationships with relatives might exist. The second point is that children may experience multiple forms of abuse simultaneously within a specific time frame. Since these children have not received relationship education, and some of them reside in impoverished neighbourhoods, this cycle of abuse may repeat across generations.

Ms. H, a social worker, has reported:

Just a few days ago, a 19-year-old girl who was contemplating suicide and had indeed attempted it while I was talking to her and filling the test form, I asked her: 'Has anyone in your family touched you?' She anxiously replied, 'Touched? Because my dad hugs me a lot, sometimes he treats me like my mom. I mean, this interaction might have happened in some places or there might have been touching.'

The social worker reports two cases as follows:

The second case involves a 25-year-old woman who mentioned that she used to play in the neighbourhood all the time. The neighbouring man had hugged her and touched her sexual organs. She felt confused at that time and said, 'I didn't know what I was doing.' This touching occurred, and later, she realized that it was abuse.

One of the abused individuals shared the following:

There was no penetration, but I remember the neighbour took me to his house, held me tightly, and I

could still hear his heavy breathing in my ear, and he touched my private parts.

Narges stated:

- *It was not just touching or looking. I was asleep.*
- *Can you retell the incident?*
- *I was asleep by the door, and I saw my dress coming down from behind, and my uncle was half-leaning on me, but nothing happened.*

Mrs. J described her experiences with several cases of abuse:

For example, my uncle was asleep, but my brother wasn't. He used to say, 'Close your eyes'. I felt a specific odour coming from under his armpit, and when I reached puberty, that scent became familiar, as if it reminded me of something. They would touch their sexual organs to mine. This happened, and when I was 17, that some similar form of sexual abuse happened. For example, I had gone with someone to see him, but when he reached out to me, I had no choice to say no, at first I resisted, but I could not defend myself.

Leila, 41 years old and an employee, recalled:

The shopkeeper came back and told me: My daughter, I said yes. He said go up and take something from the upper shelves there. He placed me on his body and raised and lowered me. I didn't understand then, but now that I think I see, he was satisfying himself and using me.

In the final category of abuses, which do not directly involve the child, by 'directly,' we mean not physically engaging the child. However, these forms of abuse can have significant psychological repercussions. In this category, there are two types of abuse: witnessing others engage in any form of sexual activity and exposure to pornographic films, as well as using a

child for pornography. In this section, we will also examine some narratives.

Ms. B stated:

My mother always displayed seductive behaviours and engaged in sexual activities in front of me, undoubtedly, on numerous occasions. My child has certainly witnessed my mother's sexual gratifications, and she has also established a relationship with her same-sex friend, my mother's lover. Eventually, she brings him home, and this relationship is evident to the child.

Fatemeh, a 26-year-old resident of a shelter, stated:

Because my mother was addicted, she engaged in prostitution. And I witnessed scenes, one of which was a sexual encounter involving several individuals.

Ms. M, a psychologist from Sanandaj city, mentioned:

I had a case involving a 6-year-old child who, when coming back from kindergarten, described witnessing sexual intercourse between their grandparents. This is a form of sexual abuse, and the child couldn't understand why their grandmother was making those sounds.

Once again, Mrs. F recounted:

She was a young lady and had been a victim of abuse by two of their neighbours' boys who lived nearby when she was six to seven years old, and those two boys were in their adolescence. They touched her body, and this continued for about a year. She even told me that this had stayed in her memory for up to two years, and it involved constant touching.

A 33-year-old architect, Ms. M, stated:

My father had a habit of leaving the television on until the early morning, and he would fall asleep in the middle of it. Then, I would suddenly wake up, or he himself would be awake, and I would see what scenes my father was watching. Afterward, in my own mind, I couldn't focus on going to school; I would just stay awake.

A 50-year-old male teacher reported:

During the war, we were all living in one room, and it was midnight when I woke up to the sound of my mother moaning and my father making strange noises in his sleep. I think I was around eight years old, and I heard my mother moaning in pain, saying something hurts or is hurting her, and my father kept saying there was nothing wrong. They were in some kind of struggle, and their voices were going up and down. It was strange to me, and I couldn't understand why my father was hurting her. They were having sex the next year in the afternoon when I opened their room's door, and my mother quickly got out, and I followed her, even though I didn't feel great about it. But I knew they were repeating the same moaning and groaning. As I got older, I found these sounds both enjoyable and disturbing, and I even wanted my partners to do the same in bed and make those sounds. Do you think that's normal? I don't think so.

Exposure of children and adolescents to explicit images and sexual content carries the significant risk of abnormally accelerating their sexual maturation, thus giving rise to profound concerns. This exposure not only sets the stage for premature engagement in sexual behaviours but also entails potential negative emotional consequences stemming from physiological changes. Additionally, it may result in social ostracization by their peers. Particularly noteworthy is the

potential influence of pornographic materials on adolescents, potentially encouraging them to experiment with risky sexual activities, thereby exposing them to physical, psychological, and legal ramifications.

It is imperative to recognize that the entire genre of pornography presents exaggerated and distorted depictions of sexual relations, which consumers internalize as authentic models of sexual behaviour. Consequently, individuals enter real-life relationships with unrealistic and excessive sexual fantasies in stark contrast to genuine experiences. This stark dichotomy between reality and the fictitious mental constructs acquired through exposure to explicit content can lead to multifaceted challenges.

When individuals are exposed to explicit content during their formative years without receiving adequate sex education, they may encounter difficulties in grasping the sounds associated with sexual activities. This lack of understanding can contribute to the development of a distorted mental perception of these encounters. This mental construct subsequently clashes with the realities of sexual relationships introduced to them as they progress through their developmental stages, often within the cultural norms of societies like Iran. This dissonance can have far-reaching consequences, encompassing internal turmoil within the individual and societal categorizations, ranging from normal to abnormal, healthy to sexually deviant, and even heterosexual to homosexual, all of which are prescribed by societal conventions. Consequently, these categorizations act as exclusionary mechanisms, inhibiting the social integration and cohesion of individuals with some forms of sexual experiences.

Presently, professionals in fields such as sex therapy and family dynamics frequently encounter individuals grappling with the repercussions of exposure to explicit content. These individuals, often labelled as patients within the medical discourse, provide a testament to the prevalence and impact of such exposure on human psychology and relationships.

Furthermore, in marital relationships, individuals may express their desires influenced by these mental constructs through

sexual fantasies, resulting in a changed understanding of their needs and relationship dynamics. This situation highlights a continuous cycle where societal norms considered deviant are later condemned and sanctioned by the same society [as the one that deems them deviant]. The reinforcement of these binary categorizations by knowledge plays a role in sustaining this cycle of power and knowledge.

Mrs. M. J, a social activist, recounts the following:

The parents of the child were imprisoned due to drug trafficking, and the child was placed with her grandmother, who worked as a sex worker during the day. The child witnessed the constant presence of various men and heard the sounds of their activities, as the grandmother had divided the room into two parts with a curtain. The child's constant concern was that they needed to grow up quickly to prevent these men from subjecting their grandmother to such torment and abuse.

Mrs. H, a social worker from a charitable institution, has shared the following:

In various instances, we encountered cases where a girl was subjected to sexual abuse by her father from the age of 8 to 22. This abuse occurred within the confines of their home, where there was no privacy, and the father had placed a curtain in the middle of the living space. The younger sister of this girl witnessed these incidents.

The overarching observation drawn from the aforementioned experiences is that abuse during childhood and adolescence results in the suppression of these pivotal developmental phases. These stages, characterized by innate creativity and freedom, are stifled by the traumas endured. In the narratives and discourse of our interviewees, we discern clear indications of an acknowledgment of this powerlessness during these formative age periods.

The psyche of an abused child or adolescent, having undergone such experiences, tends to admit to a sense of helplessness and inadequacy. Paradoxically, the transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood presents an opportunity for empowerment and compensation mechanisms to take shape.

This feeling of powerlessness, stemming from the lived experiences of abuse during childhood and adolescence, can become deeply ingrained and manifest as low self-esteem and negative emotions such as shame and worthlessness within an individual's identity. Consequently, this constructed identity significantly influences their subsequent life stages, particularly in their interactions with others, potentially leading to unconventional relationships or social isolation. In essence, this sense of powerlessness and vulnerability, evident across all three forms of abuse categorized at the outset of this section, manifests variably in terms of its scope, intensity, and resulting consequences.

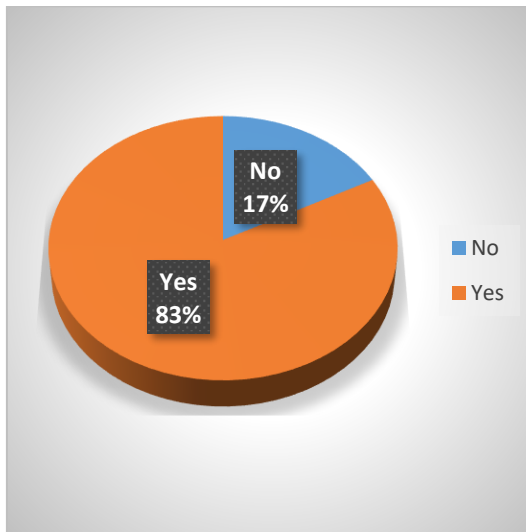


Figure 8 Distribution of respondents based on their experiences of sexual touching by adults.

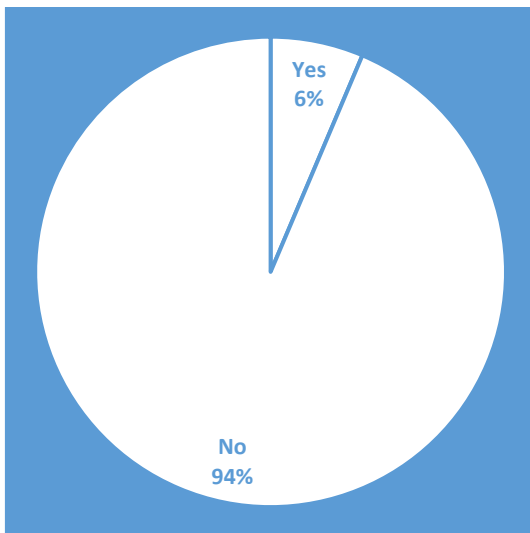


Figure 9 Distribution of respondents based on being forced to watch pornography by adults.

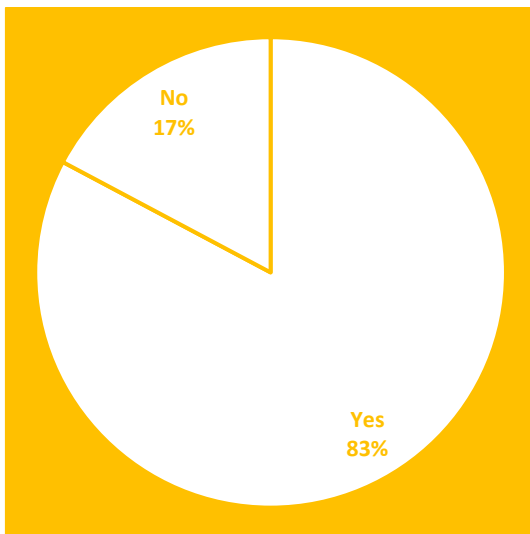


Figure 10 Distribution of respondents based on their experience of physical touch with sexual intent by adults.

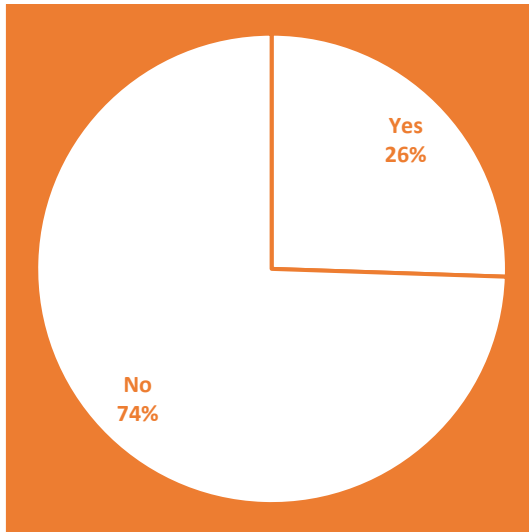


Figure 11 Distribution of respondents based on their experience of being undressed by adults and being seen (N=209).

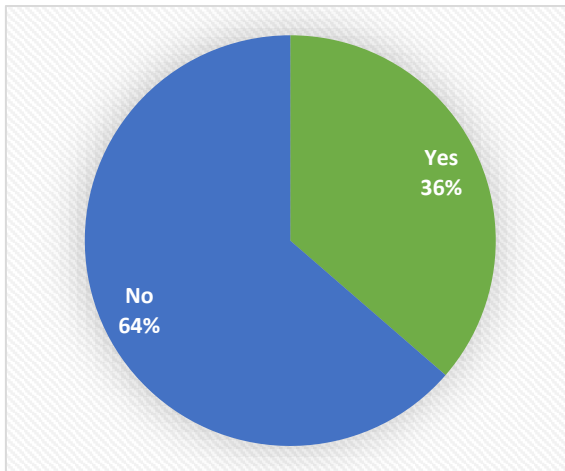


Figure 12 Distribution of Respondents by Experience with Adult Sexual Jokes

Perpetrator proximity

Perpetrators encompass a wide spectrum of individuals. At the lower end of this spectrum are those closest to the child,

individuals whom the child not only recognizes but also has a strong emotional attachment to. These individuals typically include family members such as fathers, mothers, step-parents, and siblings. Given that the child lives with these individuals and relies on them for emotional support and security, any experience of abuse by them can have profoundly detrimental effects on the child's well-being and sense of security. Since these individuals are often the child's primary source of support, when faced with their abuse, the child may feel trapped, with nowhere to turn for safety.

In some cases, when a father or stepfather sexually abuses a child, and the mother becomes aware of it, she may be unable to provide support because of her fear that her husband will abandon her, leaving her without any means of support. In these types of relationships, there is a higher likelihood that the abuse will persist, as the child has no alternative source of refuge.

On the other end of the spectrum are strangers, individuals whom the child neither recognizes nor feels any emotional attachment or connection to. Abuse in these types of relationships often takes the form of assaults and is greatly influenced by the environment. For instance, when a perpetrator realizes that no one is looking out for the child, and the child is in a vulnerable setting, they may seize the opportunity to commit abuse.

The diagram below illustrates this spectrum:

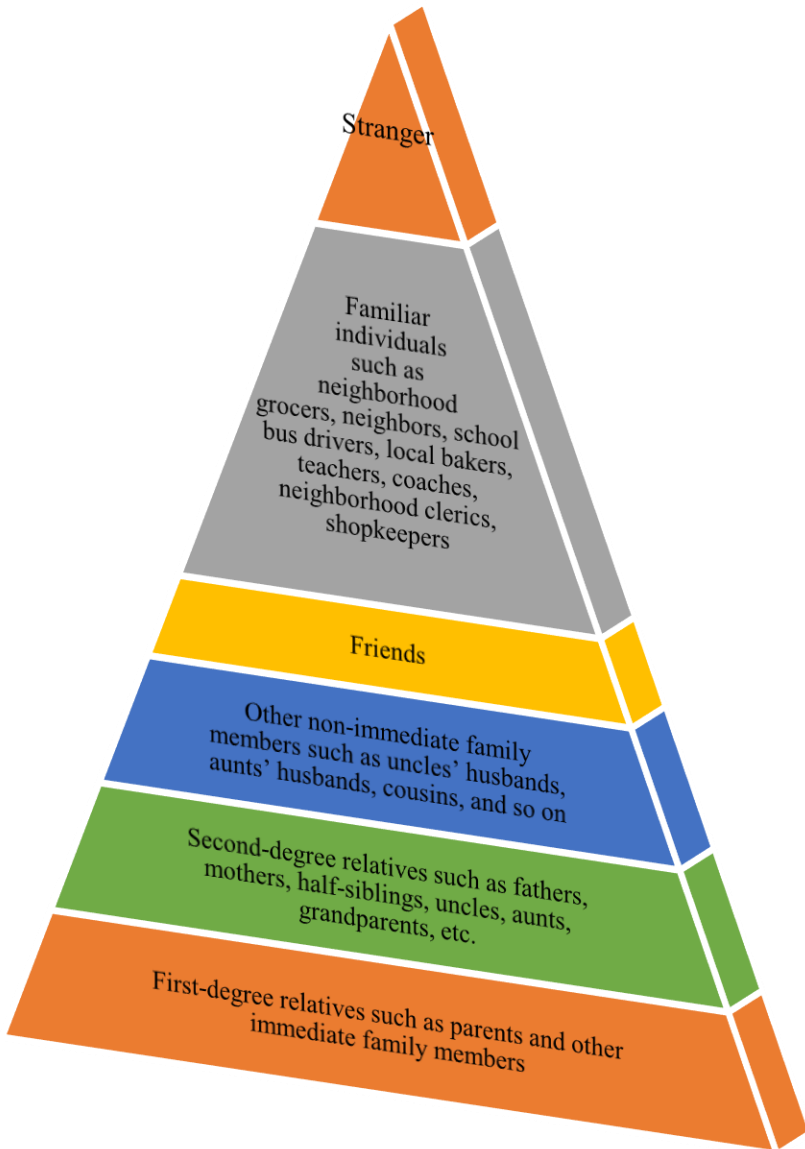


Figure 13 Spectrum of perpetrators

Perhaps it can be said that there is a relationship between the abuser and the type of abuse. However, proving this hypothesis requires more in-depth studies in this field and the use of statistical tests. The identified abusers in this study included

fathers, mothers, brothers, paternal grandfathers, maternal grandfathers, step-grandfathers, uncles, step-sisters, half-brothers, uncles, aunts, cousins, maternal uncles' husbands, maternal uncles' sons, maternal cousins, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law's husband, neighbourhood grocers, school bus drivers, friends of brothers, friends of fathers, brother's wives, boyfriends, mother's boyfriends, friends, private tutors, school teachers, coaches, clerics or mullahs, neighbourhood grocers, fruit sellers, bakers, service drivers, one of the relatives' husbands, Afghan labourers, and strangers.

The first category of abusers consists of first-degree relatives of the abused person. As mentioned earlier, in this category, there are deep relationships between the child and the abuser, which can profoundly affect both the form of abuse and its consequences. In this section, some of the experiences of the abused individuals are examined.

A 49-year-old homemaker stated:

Now that I'm under treatment and counselling, and I've talked about it before, I can speak and tell you about it. For years, I engaged in co-sleeping with my son and daughter. We all know that a mother shouldn't do such a thing, and I don't make excuses for it or justify it, even with Freudian theories. However, I always had a high sex drive, and during those times, my husband was away for years. In my opinion, considering the closed environment back then, it was better to satisfy myself with my own children rather than seeking satisfaction elsewhere. I slept with my son more often because he had the necessary organs, which was better for me. But I also touched my daughter and asked her to use her finger to finish me.

A 33-year-old woman, who is a social worker herself, described her childhood experience as follows:

When I was 11 years old, I had an experience where my father touched me inappropriately in the chest area. This happened in the middle of the night while I was asleep. I would wake up and realize what was happening, then jump out of bed. But this incident was incredibly unbelievable for me because it came from a man who was my first love and was considered the best dad in the world, both in my opinion and in the opinion of others, and from the extreme shock and fear, I fall into a deep sleep or as if fainting again, and I was affected by this incident for years.

The relationship between parents and children is a deep bond based on affection. Children see their parents as protectors and heroes in their lives, and a significant part of their existence is intertwined with them. When this perception of the parent-child relationship is shattered due to sexual abuse, children's views of their parents become blurred, and they experience conflicting emotions. On one hand, the perpetrator, who is still a parent to them, and on the other hand, the abuser, who has violated the most sensitive aspect of their relationship – a taboo matter. That's why children suffer serious psychological damage as a result of these types of abuses.

Ms. Ismaili, a painting teacher and mentor working in several non-governmental organizations, shared the following:

There was a 10-year-old boy who was very attractive and handsome. He had a friendly demeanour and was very kind in his social interactions, both with his classmates and with his teacher, Mrs. Ismaili. After some time, it was noticed that he was absent for a long time. When they inquired, they discovered that the father had been abusing the child in various ways, including sexual abuse. This boy had endured the abuse, and when he stopped coming to Mrs. Ismaili's institution for a while, they found out that the father had confined the child in the basement of their house for

several days. He was in such a state of mind that he had completely forgotten that he had locked his son there.

Ms. P, the manager and psychologist at the Darvazeh Ghar Institute, answered our question:

Do you mostly see cases within families or involving strangers?

Families. The truth is, we protect our children very well from strangers, but can we protect a child from their father? From their mother? From their aunt, uncle, or cousin? Aunts and uncles, not so much, maybe, but I haven't seen that at all. It has mostly been parents, uncles, aunts, grandfathers, and grandmothers. We had one case where we had a child there, Niloufar, and her father was abusive. Later, when she was taken into custody by the Welfare Organization and given to her paternal grandfather, he abused her terribly. She had severe psychological problems, like a severe psychosis. Even though the foundation's psychologists were very professional, her mental state remained extremely unstable even after she was separated from us.'

In this regard, Ms. Z., a religious preacher and counsellor, mentioned:

Most of them have been like this, starting with play, but there was this girl, 18 years old, whose name I've written down as Sara [...]. She had been going to her father since she was 13. Since she was 13? Yes, yes. Her parents had problems, and her mother would get angry. The girl had been interested in her father from a young age and had an attachment to him. She started going to her father since childhood. Her mother was upset that her daughter was going to her father, even though she was 18 years old. Her mother used to wear

makeup and dress well, and she saw that the father paid no attention to her. But he gave a lot of importance to the girl. Her father? Yes, one day he realized that when he came home from work, his daughter would come to him with perfume and makeup, and they had sexual relations. They had a complete relationship.

Mrs. M, the director of a community-based organization, stated that most cases of child sexual abuse involved family members. She mentioned a case where a 14-year-old boy was sexually abused by his mother's partner.

In the same context, Ms. Sattari, a child therapist, commented on consensual incestuous relationships, saying that they were rare but not unheard of. She recalled an incident during her high school years when a classmate engaged in a sexual relationship with her own brother, perceiving it as a source of satisfaction for herself.

One of the complexities associated with incestuous abuse is that the perpetrator is not only a family member but also, in some sense, a source of support for the child. In many cases, children avoid reporting such abuses and experience mixed emotions towards the perpetrator.

Ms. K, who holds a master's degree in women's studies and advocates for women's rights, emphasized the intricate nature of incestuous relationships. She pointed out that children often struggle with conflicting feelings due to the dual role of the abuser as both a family member and a source of harm. They grapple with guilt and prefer to remain silent, harbouring self-blame. The fear of disrupting the family's emotional stability, rooted in the affection and respect they once had for the perpetrator, contributes to their reluctance to disclose the abuse.

A 48-year-old man recounted his experience, stating that he was around 11 years old when his older sister initiated sexual contact with him. Initially, he was frightened and bewildered, even aroused by the

encounters. However, as the incidents continued in secrecy, he began to anticipate and even request them. Eventually, the encounters ceased abruptly, and they never discussed it again, leaving him with a sense of curiosity and confusion about what had transpired.

In this regard, Ms. Sattari, a child therapist, told us:

Consensual incestuous relationships, where both parties are willing participants, are something I have heard of, but less frequently. During my high school years, I knew a teenage girl who engaged in a relationship with her teenage brother, and she considered this relationship as a positive experience for herself.

Another complexity of incestuous abuse lies in the fact that the abuser is not only a close relative of the child but also, in a way, perceived as a source of support. In many cases, children avoid reporting these abuses and have mixed feelings towards the abuser.

Ms. K, a holder of a master's degree in women's studies and an advocate for women's rights, has expressed:

Intimate relationships with close relatives are highly intricate because the child is caught in a conflict. On one hand, the person who has assaulted them is a close blood relative, which creates a sense of guilt and self-blame. They prefer to remain silent, and their internal struggles and anxieties often revolve around feeling responsible for the incident. If I were not available, this situation would persist, and the child would likely remain silent because the abuser, who is also a source of love, respect, and security for the child within the family, is involved. This can be one of the reasons why the child may choose not to disclose the incident to anyone.

A 48-year-old man has stated:

I was around 11 years old when one summer afternoon, while all my siblings were playing in the room, my older sister, who was lying next to me, placed her legs on top of mine. After a while, she put my hand on her chest, and later, on her thighs. These incidents occurred over several times and days, with each time progressing further. Initially, I was scared, surprised, and even somewhat excited, so I tried to dismiss it as a dream. However, when I woke up, and no one else was at home, she would press me against the wall, all while staring at the door as if guarding it. She placed my hand under her shorts and asked for my touch. Later, she even wanted me to use my little finger and then my larger fingers. I obliged. Afterward, several times, she took me into the bathroom, which was outside the house, and she initiated contact with my genitals. In the final instances, I requested her to continue and even to remove her pants, but she refused, as if it was a boundary she couldn't cross. Eventually, I don't know what happened, but everything suddenly stopped, and we never discussed it or approached it again. It was very strange for me; I didn't understand what was happening, but I knew it shouldn't have been happening. My sister's unusual behaviour, characterized by rapid breathing and erratic movements, confirmed this. I was younger than all of this, but it seemed like I was enjoying it, and maybe that's why I wanted to continue.

A 37-year-old woman stated:

It's embarrassing, but I was a few years younger than my older sister, and our mother used to send us to the

bathroom together to take a shower since we were girls. Gradually, while washing my sister, I would touch her between her legs, and she would react playfully, laughing. Our mother was happy that we were bonding and having fun together. Later, I would put my hands on my own chest, which had recently started growing, and I don't know why, but they would hurt, and I would ask my sister to press them. I know you might think I'm crazy or have sadistic tendencies, but I would insert her fingers into my vagina or ask her to do it with a toothbrush handle. It was truly insane play. Later on, sometimes one of the neighbour's girls would join us, and the three of us would play together.

Regarding the first category of abusers, which includes primary family members, it can be said that one of the consequences could be the simultaneous feelings of fear, anger, and guilt, which manifest in relationships based on dependency between the child or adolescent and the abusive parent as a 'significant other.' These relationships, which are imbalanced and clingy, replace balanced relationships and emotional bonds that should be based on attachment. The outcome of such relationships can lead to the emergence of dependent individuals who will have sticky relationships with their social environment, which are not based on personal maturity and independence. Consequently, the development of independent individuality in terms of both individual and social identity, which is crucial for societal progress, may be hindered. These individuals not only lack an autonomous identity but also experience feelings of insecurity and a lack of trust in the social environment.

Sexual abuse by family members and close relatives, through weakening social capital and constructive social relationships, will have a significant impact and determinant effect on the conditions and development process of a particular society like Iran.

Since the eighteenth century, the family has become an obligatory space for emotions, feelings, and love. The family has become an exclusive space for the blossoming of sexuality, and sexuality, from birth, is intertwined with incestuous relationships. Incestuous relationships are strictly prohibited within the family but are also persistently sought after. This is because the family is the constant stimulus centre of sexuality in today's Iranian society. In the family, new personalities have emerged, including the nervous woman, the cold-tempered woman, the indifferent or obsessively compulsive mother, the sexually impotent and troubled husband, the deviant husband, the emotionally troubled daughter, the prematurely mature child, and the young homosexual man who avoids marriage or pays no attention to his wife. All of these exhibit some signs of sexual disorders and also indicate the presence of a form of abnormality in accepted and conventional systems of intimacy.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, we have witnessed families that scrutinize the slightest signs of sexuality within themselves, extract the most challenging confessions, listen to anyone who knows something about it, and open their doors to endless examinations. In the sexualized system, the family is like a crystal and one of the most valuable tactical elements, disseminating and dispersing sexuality.

Medicine, following specific knowledge rules, has taken on the responsibility of sexuality and urges families to consider sexuality as a fundamental duty and an important danger (Foucault, 2005). Psychoanalysis, which seemed to exclude the confession of sexuality from the family realm in its techniques, law of connection, and mixed games of marriage and kinship, has become widespread, especially in societies like contemporary Iran, where the marriage system and the family system needed reinforcement, after all self-denial.

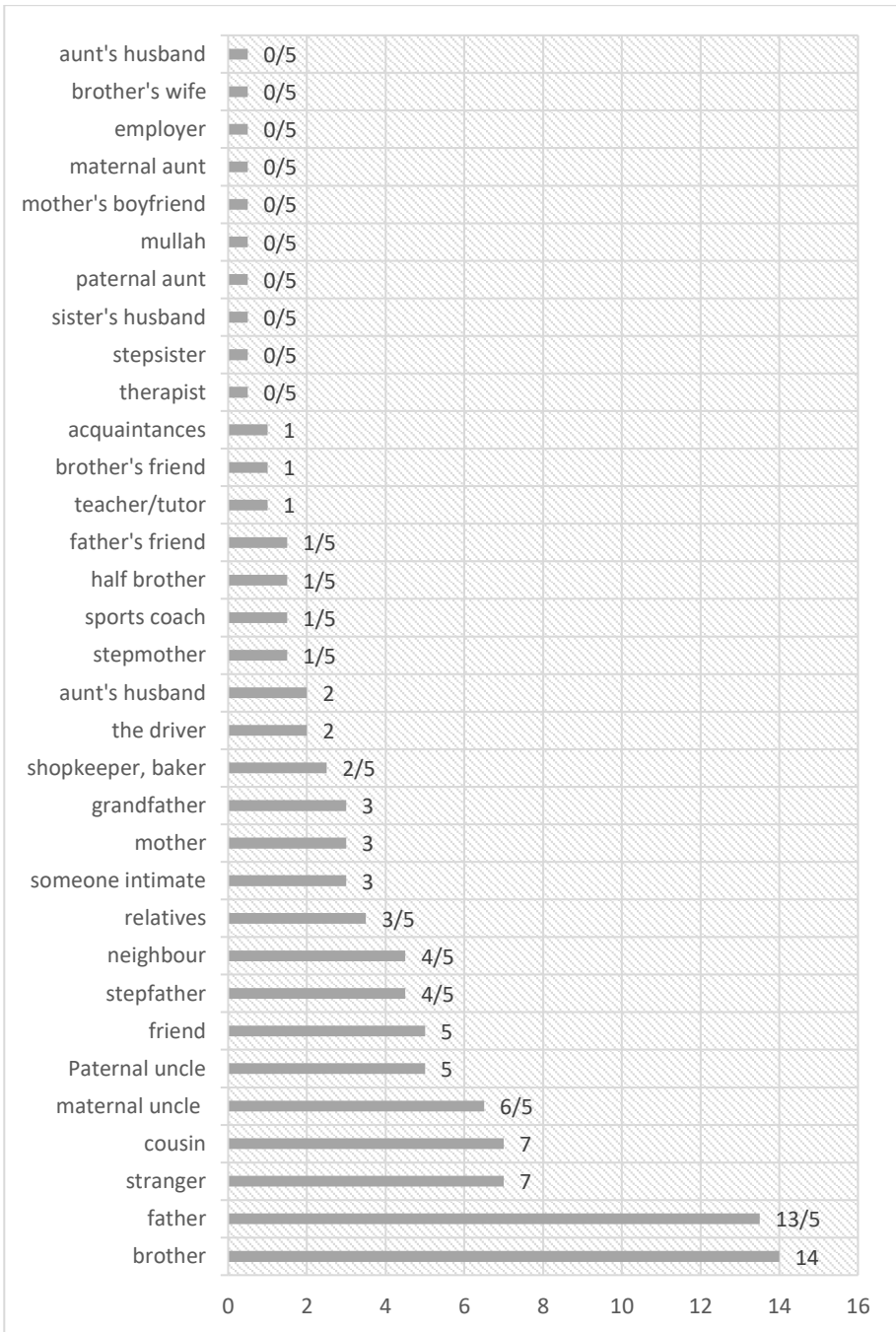


Figure 14 Distribution of Respondents by Relations with Perpetrators

The second category of perpetrators includes secondary relatives, such as stepfathers, stepmothers, half-siblings, uncles, aunts, grandfathers, grandmothers, and the like. In comparison to the first category, this group doesn't have much responsibility towards the child, and the level of connection between the child and them is not as extensive as in the first category. Due to the relationships that children have with these individuals, the likelihood of them being abused by them is very high. Because these individuals don't consider the child as a member of their primary family and have no responsibility towards them, they are more likely to harm them because they are not particularly concerned about the consequences of the abuse. The narratives in this section are as follows:

Mr. B, a counsellor, said:

One case that comes to mind is a child who was young, but their aunt, who was much older, forced them into a relationship.

Ms. B, a school counsellor and psychologist, stated:

One of the cases that recently came up was a 23-year-old woman whose biological mother is completely absent from her life, but her maternal uncle, who is currently 67 to 69 years old, and back then he was 56, had been repeatedly sexually abusing her.

Ms. N, a social worker, said:

I had a significant number of clients. I can't say I had only strangers; I had relatives and acquaintances who had family interactions.

Ms. M, a respondent, explained:

For example, I had a case of a 5-year-old girl from her stepfather's side; she had no sensation in the muscles on the right side of her body. Her biological mother had married a drug-addicted man 20 years older. Then I noticed that the girl didn't attend kindergarten, and

when I inquired, her mother said, 'Leave us alone, my daughter is happy.' One day, the girl's grandmother from her mother's side came to us and said she was being mistreated in that house, and they were taking advantage of her. She instructed her and touched her. Another case I had was a 22-year-old girl who came to me and said, 'Five years ago, my stepbrother sexually assaulted me.'

Mr. Sattari, a school teacher, mentioned:

There was a stepson, and then he was sexually exploited by his stepmother.

Mr. Khodaie, a respondent, asked:

Can you tell me the relation? It was their uncle. They were they mostly older, like seven to eight years older.

Ms. K, another respondent, said:

Did you ever experience being touched inappropriately by someone when you were a child? Oh, well, it was a neighbour. My grandfather used to do that. I hated it.

Ms. J.Z., a respondent, shared:

Well, let me tell you, if I start from the age of 7, my first experience was sexual abuse by my stepbrother.

Ms. Mimi, a respondent, recounted:

My uncle abused me. My mother left me alone at my grandmother's house. My grandmother was asleep. I was playing in the yard with a water tank when my uncle came and took me into a room. He undressed me and touched my body. He put his private part in my mouth. I remember up to a certain point, but I don't know what happened after that.

As evident from the statements of the interviewees, the factors that have been determinative in sexual abuse by the second category of perpetrators appear to be fundamentally distinct from those influencing the first category. In the second category, we observe a significantly more limited degree of control or, in other words, a lack of adequate oversight by responsible individuals, namely parents. This manifests as an unreasonable and uninformed trust placed by parents in close relatives and extended family members, often without considering the real-world probabilities and risks that could lead to harm to children and adolescents through sexual abuse.

Here, the shape and extent of societal control, particularly from the responsible members of the community concerning the well-being and socialization of children and adolescents, become relevant. What can be analysed is that in a society where the level of societal awareness falls short of desirable standards, the responsibility and control in child-rearing and socialization, primarily vested in the family institution, are overlooked. Societal awareness, in turn, emanates from societal existence, and the development of societal awareness and societal responsibility—elements rooted in the societal psyche—is hampered by the existing economic turmoil in a society, such as the current economic instability in Iran.

Under these circumstances, the prioritization of civil and educational institutions tasked with the responsibility of societal awareness in child-rearing and socialization will be lacking. This signifies that there exists a tangible relationship between societal materiality and societal mindset, which comprises societal existence and societal awareness. However, the development of societal awareness and societal responsibility, both of which are inherently cognitive dimensions of society, will remain stunted in the face of prevailing economic instability. Consequently, societal control faces formidable challenges and inefficacies.

The third category of perpetrators includes other family members such as uncles-in-law, aunts' husbands, cousins, and the like. These individuals, due to their close relationships and access to the child, are more likely to subject them to abuse compared to others. In some cases, parents entrust their child

to these family members for caregiving, while in other situations, the perpetrator may exploit familial ties to enter the child's home and commit abuse. This section also features several narratives.

A 49-year-old man from the Bazaar shared:

I regret not being able to speak with you over the phone. I experienced a sense of embarrassment that prevented me from conducting the interview as planned. You know, these things happened a long time ago, but they still carry a sense of shame and disgrace. When I was a child, I visited my younger cousin, who was smaller than me, in my dreams and while awake. Honestly, when I was younger, during family gatherings, some distant relatives would frequently bring her to me, and I would try to keep my distance. But I never had the courage to speak up. Sometimes, we played with other kids, and I felt a certain arousal, like my desires were awakened. Initially, my cousin wouldn't say anything and would pretend to sleep. It was evident because, for instance, I could easily move her to my side, or she would open her legs and such. Later on, we started doing things together, and she even made requests. She would say things like, 'Yes, like this, but not like that.' It was as if both of us knew, and we enjoyed it.

A woman, identified as B, stated:

My seven-year-old son was sexually abused by his 18-year-old cousin three to four times.

University professors and directors of various rehabilitation programs have mentioned:

If I were to share personal experiences, it often happens with someone who is trusted by the family, especially the mother. This neighbour issue happens frequently,

and then we have the relatives. Those who talk about strangers are usually from larger families and lower socioeconomic areas. After that, we have close relatives. It's strange and unbelievable how often we see these cases now, even involving uncles, cousins, and even fathers and grandfathers.

Mr. Riazati commented:

Have you received any reports of relationships with relatives? No, mostly after acquaintances come relatives. It usually goes like this: acquaintances, family, and then relatives.

A woman identified as F recounted:

This case I want to talk about was 21 years old. She was a lady, and she had been abused by two of her neighbours when she was six or seven years old. They used to touch her body, and it lasted for about a year or two, as far as she remembers. She said it was touching, and they used to touch her. She recalled that they were touching her body, and it was all over.

Shida stated:

He was my cousin.

Another category of individuals are those whom the child recognizes in some way. These individuals include acquaintances like neighbourhood shopkeepers, neighbours, school bus drivers, local bakers, teachers, coaches, and neighbourhood clerics. In many cases, children become acquainted with these individuals due to their daily activities, such as shopping, going to school, or participating in sports. It can be said that in many instances, the abuse by this category of individuals is not premeditated. For example, when the perpetrator realizes that there is no supervision around the child, they may attack and harm the child. This section also includes several narratives.

A 32-year-old shopkeeper said:

I had sex a few times with a teenage girl who was vibrant and lively. Since there was nowhere else, we did it behind the store. She even wanted it; she kept coming with makeup and all. You see, why should a young girl go out alone to the street and the store? I wanted her to lie down, and I took care not to get caught. I didn't want to ruin my business. I wanted her to moan and groan like in those adult movies so that I could finish and get back to work, and everyone could continue with their lives. Now I see that she has several children, and I don't know if she remembers or not, but I wish I had the courage to talk to her one day and apologize. I was wrong, especially considering I wasn't that old myself, but I shouldn't have done it.

A woman named Ismaili, a painting instructor in an NGO, said:

Last year, at Darvazeh Ghar, [a southern district of Tehran], apparently, a man established a Hosseiniyeh religious institution. He was wearing clergy clothes and invited young boys there to go through religious courses and some rituals, but apparently this man has a different idea and after some time, he starts touching the children.

Ms. B, a school counsellor, reported:

There is another girl who is 18 years old and is taking the university entrance exam this year. In her highly religious family, they used to hire a private tutor for her during elementary school to teach her mathematics, and this tutor was a distant relative. He would come to her, teach her the lessons, and then leave. Since he had a private room to work with her, he mentioned that it took a long time during these sessions when he taught her the subject.

Ms. B has stated:

They said that when she was 13 or 14 years old, one of the neighbourhood boys would come into their room and forcefully sexually abuse her. The elderly neighbour became aware of the situation and came to her rescue.

Ms. F has narrated:

The first case I want to talk about is when she was 21 years old. She was a married woman and was sexually harassed by two of their neighbours' sons who lived nearby. This happened when she was six or seven years old, and those two boys were in their adolescence. They would touch her body and for about a year, and even for up to two years, according to her memory, there was constant touching and inappropriate contact.

Ms. Sine, a social activist in the field of children, commented:

Look, I've sent you a voice message from one of my friends. It's about when she was 7 or 8 years old. There was a supermarket near our house where a man, maybe his father, used to come and stay there. When she went there one morning, this elderly man approached her and touched her inappropriately.

Ms. B said:

[...] I think I was 6 years old at the time, not attending school. That boy, I don't know if he was 17 or 18 years old, I was very young. He took me to the back [inside the supermarket behind the refrigerator], laid me down on the floor, slept on top of me, and rubbed himself against me.

Mr. Z has narrated:

We went into his shop, and because he was very scared, he quickly took us to the storage area. First, he pressed himself against me, and then he pressed himself against my friend. Our pants were down, and we were against the wall, and ultimately, he finished on me.

The social worker at the Naser Khosrow Children's Home reported:

The mother was separated from the father, and the daughter was living with her father. The father had a friend whom he trusted a lot, and they had frequent interactions. This friend had a manipulative behaviour that convinced the girl through acts of kindness, such as buying her things, and he sexually assaulted the girl three or four times.

One of the children at the Behnam Maghari Institute said:

At the age of 9, I was sexually assaulted by my father's close friend. He touched me inappropriately, and it made me feel very uncomfortable. After that, I couldn't trust anyone anymore.

Ultimately, the last group of abusers consists of strangers.

Ms. B says:

The 17-year-old Afghan girl, who has six siblings at home and she herself is the fourth child, her father is a street vendor, and her mother is illiterate and a homemaker. They used to commute to school together in the Darvazeh Ghar neighbourhood. One day, two young men forcibly took her into a partially constructed building and sexually assaulted her. Anal intercourse occurred, and things deteriorated significantly afterward.

Mr. Mahdavi, a therapist, told us:

I would like to inform you that a 30-year-old unmarried woman came to me. She had experienced sexual abuse at the age of 10 by a man who was a stranger. It happened on a street where a person approached her, grabbed her hand like a thief, and took her to a secluded place where he sexually assaulted her. This child was brought back to her family crying and distressed.

Ms. Mima said:

Another issue is that the majority of sexual assaults are committed by women against their relatives. As for men and boys, they have more freedom and can be sexually exploited by strangers in general.

The responsible person at the Women's Support Centre said:

Boys are subjected to sexual harassment by non-relatives outside the home, but girls, mostly within the home, experience abuse from relatives.

One of the victims has stated:

In Golpayegan, a 10-year-old boy was sexually assaulted by an Afghan worker who worked for their neighbour. The locals became aware of the incident and confronted the perpetrator.

The accounts above reveal that the perpetrator of sexual abuse can be anyone, ranging from the closest individuals to the child, such as family members, to complete strangers with whom the child has no prior acquaintance. When it comes to the ratio of abusers, a few points can be highlighted. Firstly, it appears that the closer the child's relationship is to the perpetrator and the existence of an emotional bond between them, the longer the duration of the abuse tends to be. This prolonged abuse, due to the inherent dependency created, results in significantly more devastating consequences for the child. As expressed by Ms. R.:

Unfortunately, when the abuse occurs within the realm of relatives and family members, it becomes a recurring pattern. One of the severe ramifications is the betrayal the child experiences from those they expect to be their allies within the family, which amplifies the magnitude of the harm inflicted on the child.'

Additionally, Mr. S shared a surprising case where he reported an incident involving a father who was a paedophile and maintained continuous contact with his 6 and 9-year-old sons.

Secondly, the lack of awareness among families regarding the fact that close relatives and acquaintances, even those in the immediate circle, can pose a threat to the child's well-being. This lack of awareness leads them to mistakenly believe that their child is safe from abuse within these relationships. Consequently, they may provide inadequate care or entrust the child's supervision to these individuals. As Ms. Bahrami pointed out,

In many cases, it is the mother's relatives who have a closer relationship with the child and are trusted within the family. This misplaced trust can lead to neglect and a failure to question these matters.

Another point that needs to be addressed is regarding strangers. Based on the accounts reviewed, it seems that strangers are more likely to engage in abuse in disorganized neighbourhoods and vulnerable urban spaces. As Dr Abhariyan mentioned, 'People in densely populated families and lower socioeconomic areas often talk about abuse by strangers and passers-by.' Individuals such as neighbourhood shopkeepers, school bus drivers, local bakers, teachers, coaches, and religious figures are known to engage in these abuses to some extent as a result of their daily interactions with children. When a child goes to the neighbourhood shop or school, there is a high probability of experiencing harassment and assault from the shopkeeper or bus driver. These activities make the vulnerable target (the child) easily accessible to the perpetrator without a capable protector nearby.

Lastly, the last point relates to the gender of the victims. In this regard, Ms. Mandani stated,

The majority of the abuse is committed by women who are victimized by relatives, while men and boys, due to their greater freedom and ability to move around, are generally subjected to sexual exploitation by strangers.

According to this quote, since society and families grant more freedom of action to boys, they can be more present in society and interact with different individuals, including strangers. Therefore, the likelihood of experiencing abuse from them is higher. All these mentioned factors are initial assumptions that can be further investigated in future studies.

The experiences of the third category, where individuals were sexually abused by strangers, indicate that neighbourhood factors, along with other factors mentioned in the previous two categories, play a significant role in the occurrence of effective abuse. Neighbourhoods with noticeable deprivation and high population density provide a more favourable environment for abuse due to the low social control and responsibility towards groups

Background Conditions and Factors of Intervention in Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse does not occur in a vacuum and is influenced by various backgrounds and factors. Backgrounds refer to the set of conditions and situations that lead to the presence of the studied phenomenon. Conditions encompass the structural foundations that shape the nature, requirements, or issues to which individuals respond with action, interaction, and emotions, ranging from macro to micro levels. These backgrounds, on one hand, somewhat provoke the abusers, and on the other hand, they expose the abused individuals to the abusers without control or protection. Factors frequently serve as pivotal links between backgrounds and abuse, functioning as essential connecting components in the process. The identified backgrounds and factors in this study include poverty and deprivation,

dysfunctional and ineffective family structures and parenting practices, institutional inefficiency in sex education and support for victims, lack of clear laws, conflicts and contradictions in existing laws, vulnerable spaces, characteristics of sexual offenders, and the victims themselves.

Structures of Abuse

Vulnerable spaces

In the realm of social sciences and geography, the discourse surrounding space and time holds significant importance, as all human behaviours possess spatial and temporal dimensions that influence them. Giddens has emphasized the significance of these spatial and temporal dimensions in social actions and criticized social scientists for neglecting them (Giddens, 1984: 110). Over the past few decades, criminology has taken a keen interest in understanding the spatial and temporal aspects of human behaviour. Within this context, various theories and concepts have emerged, including the theory of defensible spaces (Newman, 1972), the notion of broken windows (Wilson and Kling, 1982), environmental criminology (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1981), daily activities theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979), and crime pattern theory (Sidebottom, 2016).

A fundamental question arises: what do we mean by 'defenceless spaces' or simply, 'spaces'? In a straightforward definition, space can be described as an unbounded three-dimensional area in which objects exist and events occur, possessing relative distances and directions (Trastand, 2003). Consequently, space can encompass a wide range, from an individual's private residence to the interior of a taxi or open fields. In this context, Brantingham and Brantingham offer a significant definition of environmental criminology, referring to it as 'a discrete location in time and space where a criminal event occurs' (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1981: 7). Oscar Newman introduces the concept of defensible spaces, characterizing them as 'an alternative arrangement of mechanisms (real and symbolic barriers defined as spheres of influence, creating opportunities for surveillance) that

collectively empower inhabitants to exert control over their environment' (1972: 3). He underscores the shared goal of all defensible space programs, which is to reshape the physical structure of communities so that residents can assert control over their surroundings. This includes the streets, grounds around their residences, lobbies, and interior corridors. Newman further highlights the issues associated with spaces that lack a distinct identity to humans, emphasizing that such anonymous spaces hinder residents from defining appropriate and acceptable behaviour within them. In such spaces, the sense of ownership and the ability to exercise it are elusive, making it challenging to distinguish residents from intruders (Newman, 1996: 11-12). Thus, in simple terms, a defenceless space is one that is not under the control of its owners or users and can become a site for criminal activities, including sexual harassment.

The defenceless spaces identified in this research encompassed a wide spectrum of locations where child sexual abuse occurred. These spaces included marginalized areas, high-crime neighbourhoods, remote areas in villages, fields and plains, the victim's home, the perpetrator's home, a neighbour's home, a third party's home, workplaces, Hosseiniyehs, schools, streets, team houses, dilapidated buildings, unfinished structures, areas within neighbourhoods and alleys, welfare facilities, parks, supermarkets, locations outside the city, routes to school, taxis, school buses, gyms, swimming pools, and the homes of sports coaches. As evident, this encompasses a broad range of spaces, ranging from shelters to the homes of abused parents and areas outside urban centres, but defenceless spaces are not limited to these examples. Consequently, a defenceless space is not necessarily a place of distraction; it can even be the victim's own home.

Another question then arises: how do defenceless spaces facilitate harm? Two mechanisms can be identified: first, they weaken mechanisms such as surveillance and social control, and second, by undermining these mechanisms, they may encourage perpetrators to engage in such behaviour, especially those without prior intentions or plans for aggression. Numerous criminological studies have also delved into these

mechanisms. In the subsequent section, we will further explore the concept of defenceless spaces through quotations from relevant sources.

The possibility of various forms of violence and harassment, including physical abuse, is significantly high in locations commonly known as unorganized or disorganized neighbourhoods. These areas face social disarray due to factors such as poverty, unstable housing situations, diverse ethnic populations, immigration patterns, urban planning deficiencies, ineffective architectural designs, legal issues, and environmental irregularities stemming from inadequate development and civic shortcomings. Consequently, the ability of residents to maintain social order and uphold shared values diminishes.

These neighbourhoods often fall into the categories of marginalized or inefficient urban areas. One example of such a neighbourhood in Tehran is Darvazeh Ghar, which grapples with multiple structural challenges and their associated consequences, including a heightened level of criminal activity. This research examines numerous accounts of sexual harassment incidents within the Darvazeh Ghar neighbourhood.

The director of Tolo Bineshanha Children's Home said:

Families living in high-risk neighbourhoods such as Darvazeh Ghar, which are perilous areas around Tehran, like Varamin and the surrounding villages, face challenging circumstances. These peripheral areas lack both supervision and educational resources. The cultural level of these families is not high, and individuals struggling with addiction in such conditions often lack the competence to care for children. The Welfare Organization also lacks sufficient resources to provide care for all children. As a result, many children in these areas suffer from sexual harassment and abuse until they reach adulthood.

The neighbourhood environment around Darvazeh Ghar not only refers to the external environment outside the neighbourhood but also to the interior space of some houses that can easily be transformed into vulnerable spaces. In this neighbourhood, many families live in houses where each room is rented to a family, so it is possible for a large number of families to live in one house. In fact, one of the factors that have made these marginal urban spaces vulnerable is the high population density relative to the residential land area where these people live. The disregard for the standards of the environment-to-population ratio in the construction of residential spaces indicates inefficient policies in urban planning and architecture and a lack of coherent supervision over the issues of marginalization in Iranian society.

This factor has a significant impact on the mutual interaction space among family members. Since it does not provide enough private space relative to the family members, it can blur the boundary between the private and public spheres of family members and affect their relationships, creating tense spaces and psychological and emotional issues for them. On the other hand, this population density blurs the boundary between the private space of each family and the public space and communication with other families, which in turn leads to a decrease in control and supervision. As many residents of this neighbourhood live in poverty, parents are forced to work and leave their children at home. Leaving these children in these houses, which at certain times of the day become vulnerable spaces when parents are not at home and leave their children alone, provides a good opportunity for their abuse. According to the testimony of a female prisoner, she used to live in a house near Darvazeh Ghar. The houses where the rooms and courtyards are shared and have communal kitchens are like this. Apparently, her parents went to work every day, and when she was 13 or 14 years old, one of the neighbourhood boys entered her room and forcefully assaulted her. The elderly neighbour noticed and came to her rescue.

So, some spaces may become vulnerable spaces only for a limited time. In the above case, if the elderly neighbour had

been aware of the harasser's intentions from the beginning, taking care of the space would have prevented his attack.

Rural areas are also full of vulnerable spaces and expose children to various forms of abuse. Part of this abuse is due to the daily activities of children, which causes them to interact with perpetrators in the absence of capable protectors and experience abuse. For example, in rural areas, many children are engaged in activities such as animal husbandry and farming. They are often left alone with perpetrators, and the perpetrator may not have planned or intended to abuse them beforehand. However, when a child is left alone and lacks proper education and self-control skills, the perpetrator may harm them. Shida, who was attacked by her cousin and several other people in the village, described the vulnerable spaces in the village in several accounts like this:

In the past, when we lived in the village, there were instances when I accompanied my cousin to tend to the sheep. On one occasion, we were behind the village school when he asked me to come inside the school bathroom to show me something. Initially, I was hesitant, but eventually, I went in. Inside, he pulled down my pants and placed his genitals between my legs. I felt scared and cried throughout the ordeal. He would forcefully engage in such acts. Despite pleading with him numerous times to stop, he persisted. For example, he would take me into abandoned houses and continue his actions. Similarly, when we went to tend to the sheep, he would lead me into the reed fields and repeat the same behaviour. His satisfaction seemed to rely on these encounters. I didn't derive any pleasure from them; I simply didn't resist much. I knew it wouldn't cause physical harm, just discomfort. However, I was afraid that resisting would lead to him using even greater force.

Other individuals who preferred not to disclose their names, the experience of sexual abuse in rural environments has been described as follows:

On several occasions, during our rides on the donkey together, he would instruct me from behind to hold him tightly around the waist. Gradually, he would initiate actions such as guiding my hand towards his chest. I found myself experiencing a mixed response to these encounters. Considering the physical closeness, the warmth emanating from our bodies, and my nascent understanding of sexuality at the age of 11 or 12, there was a certain allure in those moments. It was as if the rhythmic swaying of the donkey and the unique warmth it provided, combined with the presence of this person, intensified the sensations. One day, while on our journey, he mentioned a water hole along the way, which served as an irrigation source for the fields. He suggested we stop, eat, rest, and sleep there. Unaware of his intentions, I followed his instructions and lay down. It was during one or two such instances that he began to touch and stimulate me, while I remained oblivious to the significance of his actions. Eventually, they led me to fall asleep, and upon awakening, I discovered he had taken advantage of my vulnerability by forcibly spreading my legs and engaging in intimate contact.

Mona has described the vulnerable spaces surrounding her home in the following terms:

I had a friend whose older brother was around. The place we lived in was all messed up with ruins and hills. We used to play by the Jordan River back then. I was just a little kid, maybe 4 or 5 years old, and it was the first time something like this happened to me. I remember it clearly, right in front of our house. My

mom wasn't paying much attention, she was kind of clueless, and there was this guy in a car playing around with me. And then there was my brother, doing something inappropriate by sticking his thing on my back. And then there was this other time when my uncle tried to get close to me in a weird way.

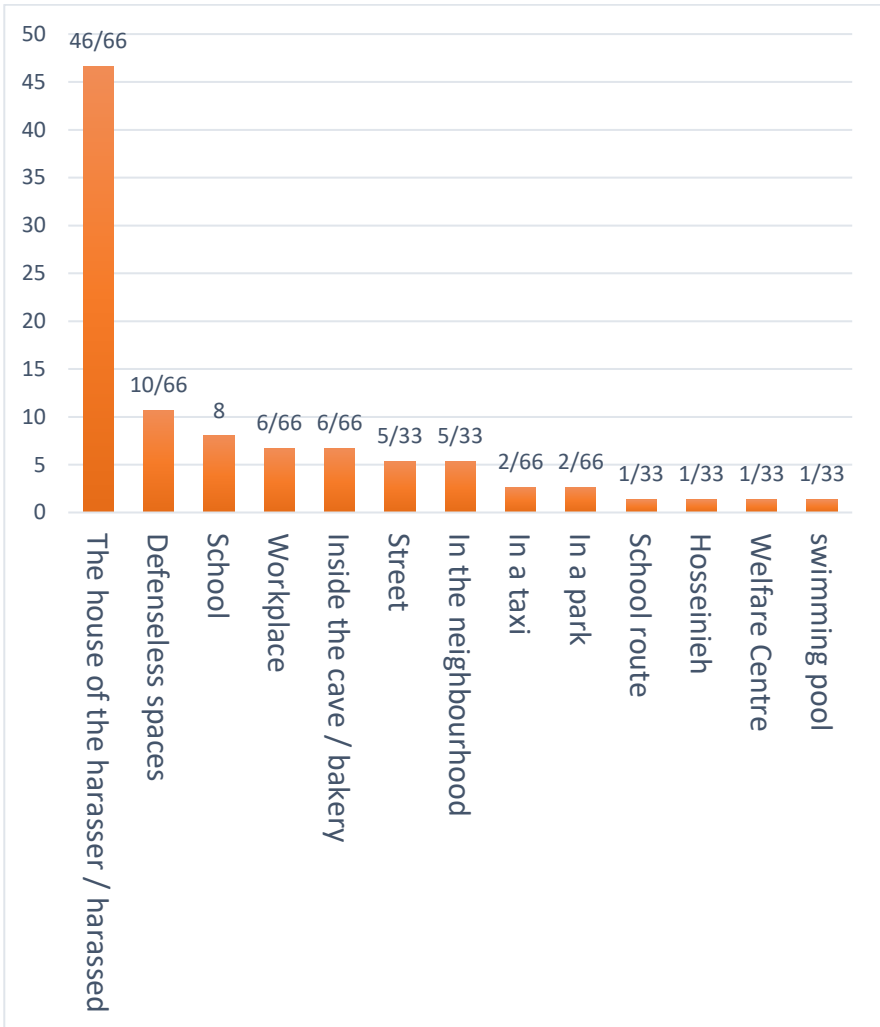


Figure 15 Distribution of respondents according to place of abuse

Apart from the prevalent vulnerable spaces within villages and cities, any other location or place, whether inside or outside the

house, such as taxis and clubs, can also become defenceless spaces. It can be said that many of these spaces become defenceless because they lack guardians who can intervene in times of danger. In fact, the main factor contributing to the vulnerability of these spaces is not solely due to their physical and architectural conditions, but rather due to cultural and educational issues that govern them, or the absence of written and unwritten behavioural norms that should be regulated and managed for these spaces through legal, civil, and ethical structures within society. Since there are no established rules, there will be no supervision and control over the enforcement of behavioural norms in these spaces, and the offenders who occupy these spaces are well aware of the lack of rules and the absence of public and legal oversight.

There is a lack of upbringing and ethics in these spaces to compensate for these deficiencies with internal self-control. Consequently, the combination of these factors transforms such spaces into defenceless areas. Therefore, the absence or weakening of external control resulting from the lack of systematic rules and structural issues, as well as the internal control arising from ineffective processes and educational and ethical issues in society, can all be applicable to the case of the home and the family of the victim, especially in cases where the abuse occurs within the family by relatives.

Leila has narrated her experiences in this regard as follows:

Sometimes it was our own house, and sometimes it was a bathroom near my grandmother's house, in the basement. It was a secluded place where no one could see.

Most individuals who have experienced abuse and harassment by relatives have encountered it within their own homes. Below, we will delve into some of their narratives.

Hamed has shared his experience at his grandmother's house:

We used to gather there and sleep together with the other children, our uncle, and aunt. One night, I noticed that he came to sleep next to me in the middle of the

night, and we had similar experiences with him. For instance, there was another child, referred to with a slang term, who had a similar encounter with Uncle Ali. I suspect he may have done the same with my aunt's children.

The grandmother's house, which is generally considered a safe and joyful place for childhood memories, is also one of the defenceless spaces. Typically, this house is perceived as a safe haven for all children and grandchildren, and the grandmother looks after them all equally, loving and trusting each one. In the grandmother's perspective, there is no abuse within the family members. However, due to excessive trust in her own child, other children have often become victims of sexual abuse. In the traditional lifestyle where gathering at the grandmother's house is customary, this trust and sense of security could be risky.

In the modern lifestyle, with the challenges faced by working women, this delegation of childcare to the grandmother's house or relatives takes place for different reasons and in a different manner. Many women, due to the high costs of daycare centres in Iran and the unstable economic conditions, entrust their children to their grandmother's house or relatives during their working hours. This employment issue and the high expenses of childcare increase the likelihood of children being cared for at the grandmother's house or with relatives, which is considered a safe and secure place. Consequently, the probability of potential harm or abuse occurring through this environment also increases.

The manager of an institution in the Darvazeh Ghar neighbourhood has spoken about the issue of harassment in this area:

The location of the incident is typically the child's own home because they live in these residential areas, meaning the same house with a courtyard and multiple rooms.

Ms. B, who had experienced harassment by her uncle, says:

Once, while I was sleeping at home, my uncle would occasionally come and go from his sister's house. It was one morning, and I was feeling drowsy. I had a habit of sleeping on my side with my hand resting on my head. However, due to a distressing memory, I had to break that habit. Then, in that state between sleep and wakefulness, I noticed my uncle approaching me and placing something in my palm.

Ms. J, a social worker, has stated:

The incidents primarily occurred within the household. For instance, when I was 8 years old, my aunt's family was living with us. At that time, the family was unaware that they were leaving us alone. The aunt's son would be alone in one part of the house, while I was alone on the other side. It was in this setting that the incident took place.

The paternal home, which everyone refers to as a place of comfort and safety, can unfortunately become a space for harassment and insecurity. In many cases, because the victims have nowhere else to live or no one to support them, and they are unfamiliar with government support services such as social emergency services and welfare centres, they are forced to live with their abusive fathers for years and experience abuse.

Essentially, in underdeveloped societies like Iran, the concept of a child's defenseless space primarily relies on their own home. Unfortunately, if these children experience abuse from immediate family members, the lack of robust support institutions becomes a significant challenge in effectively protecting them from their defenseless environment. The existing support systems either do not exist or have minimal impact in terms of tangible assistance. Consequently, the victims are forced to endure living with their abusive parents for extended periods of time due to the absence of adequate protective measures.

The home of the abuser can also become a space for abuse. There are two main reasons for this. Sometimes parents are forced to entrust their children to relatives and acquaintances, and in such situations, some of them may exploit the children. The second scenario occurs when the abuser manipulates the child using various tactics, luring them into their own home and subjecting them to abuse.

Ms. F, an expert, has stated:

The second incident involved a 25-year-old woman who shared that she used to spend a lot of time outside, playing and interacting with others. However, she revealed that one day, our neighbour's husband approached her, physically assaulted her, and then forcefully took her to his house. He proceeded to embrace her and engage in inappropriate touching of her genital area.

Ms. K, a social worker, has stated:

Numerous incidents have been reported to occur within the home, as well as in the homes of neighbours, friends, and acquaintances whom the mother trusts and leaves the child with. In the case of teenagers, it often takes place in the homes of their boyfriends. For instance, a teenager formed a friendship with a boy who gradually gained her trust. However, despite the girl's unwillingness to engage in sexual activities, she was coerced by the boy, resulting in harm inflicted upon the child.

There is a correlation between adolescent abuse perpetrated by individuals of the same sex and the prevalence of adolescent issues in Iran. As mentioned earlier, one of the major issues faced during adolescence is identity. Adolescence is a transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, characterized by uncertainties and challenges, including the lack of recognition of one's identity. Due to the lack of understanding

of adolescence and the adolescent period, families and society sometimes perceive them as children, which can create a sense of helplessness for them, while in other situations, they are labelled as adults.

These identity ambiguities resulting from the lack of awareness and knowledge about this stage of life create challenges for both the adolescent and their family and society, leading to a significant gap and disconnect in their relationships. Consequently, the mentioned factors have weakened the emotional bond, trust, and sense of security that adolescents feel towards their families and society, along with a lowered self-esteem and feelings of helplessness. These factors have also caused confusion and a lack of direction in the lives of adolescents in Iranian society. All of the mentioned aspects have fostered emotional closeness, characterized by an attachment-oriented nature rather than bonding, with individuals of the same sex. This distinction between attachment and bonding is important because it highlights the depth of the emotional connection and the potential implications. This attachment-based closeness has the potential to create an environment that facilitates sexual abuse.

Religious places such as mosques and husseiniyahs can also become sites for abuse. A prominent example is the case of Saeed Toosi, a Quran reciter who gained media attention. There may be many other cases that have not received media coverage.

Schools can also sometimes become a place for abuse by teachers and certain other school officials. In recent years, some of these cases have also received media coverage, such as the example of Moein High School in West Tehran.

Mr. Aftakhari, the school principal, observed:

What is the connection between the issue of child abuse and your profession? You see, we had situations among colleagues where there was inappropriate behaviour involving students. There were one or two instances where a teacher abused their position of trust. No, I

don't want to exaggerate or make it seem too widespread.

Mr. Kari, the deputy, stated:

Most of it happens in homes. It occurs within each other's homes. There is also one case in school. Because schools have a lot of supervision and many students, if they want to make a move, they will get caught. Are they afraid of getting caught? Yes, but it has happened within the school system. I had a student who would gather 10-15 people around them during recess in the schoolyard. A teacher responsible for student affairs sexually assaulted a first-year middle school student who was also wearing clerical attire at school. We couldn't find those students anymore, they were gone. They would tell the children to come to the school as an extra class outside of school hours, saying that the other staff members wouldn't be there.

It is likely that the issue is more serious in student dormitory environments, where students are together for longer periods of time, and more dominant individuals may subject weaker individuals or those with specific characteristics to harassment.

There was a boy in the dormitory who, when school was out or during recess, would go into the city and the nearby neighbourhood and harass girls who were alone in the alleys. The children in school eventually noticed this and from then on, those who were older than him would bother him and subject him to harassment.

A significant number of individuals who were interviewed mentioned their neighbourhood supermarket as a place of harassment. Ms. B has stated:

To be honest, I remember when my mother gave me money at that age to go and buy groceries from the neighbourhood supermarket. I used to go there a lot to shop and I knew the shopkeeper. One time, he told me to come to another section, took my hand, and led me behind the counter. There were old refrigerators there, like the ones they used to have in old shops, where they stored butter and such. He took me to the back and closed the door from behind in the shop. At that time, I was young, maybe around 6 years old. I didn't go to school. I don't know how old he was, maybe 17 or 18, but I was very young. He led me to the back and made me lie down on the floor, and he lay on top of me. He rubbed himself against me, and then he got up and gave me a piece of chocolate and said, 'Go home now.' It was he who opened this door for me.

Samaneh has described her experience from the age of 5 as follows:

I came out of the house and there was a fruit vendor at the end of the street. I went there, and he said, 'Come here, let me give you a banana.' My mom always used to buy from him, and we had no issues. So, I went there, and then he started touching me. I wanted to pull myself back and go away, but there was a curtain-like situation behind the shop. He forcefully took me there and, well, what can I say? He penetrated my vagina and anus. I started bleeding, and then he got scared and locked himself in his shop. I was in a lot of pain, and I had a fever and shivers for three days.

We expect support centres such as welfare organizations to serve as a backbone for individuals who are vulnerable and socially disadvantaged. However, sometimes they can become a place of harassment as well.

Mr. Riazati has stated about this:

... Another issue is that children with intellectual disabilities often face a considerable amount of harassment, even within healthcare and welfare facilities. I encountered a situation where systematic harassment took place in a welfare institution. I recall that it received some media attention, with videos being broadcasted to the extent that it stayed in my memory.

Streets, parks, unfinished buildings, and other vulnerable urban spaces can also become places of harassment at certain times. The manager of a centre for children with disabilities and drug abuse was asked about the location of harassment, and they responded:

The children we deal with here are considered street kids, and usually, these incidents happen on the streets.

Ms. H has stated regarding the above case:

One day, two young men forcefully entered the unfinished building and sexually assaulted them. Anal intercourse took place, and afterwards, the situation deteriorated significantly.

Ms. Shima Sattari, a psychologist, has quoted one of her clients as follows:

A 15-year-old girl, while going to school at an hour of the day when it was secluded, was forcibly taken by two men to a partially constructed building in the neighbourhood. She was horrifically assaulted, and both perpetrators quickly left the scene. The girl remained semi-conscious there for several hours until she regained her senses and found the strength to escape and seek help.

Sometimes children may face assault and harassment in school transportation services or taxis. Mr. Mahdavi, a psychologist, has stated:

The driver of the school van had been abusing the child for two years.

Or one of the victims narrated:

I was sitting in a taxi, and there was a man sitting next to me. His hand was initially on the front seat, and then I thought he was being cautious about not doing anything to me. Suddenly, I saw his hand coming towards me, and his other hand was not visible at all. I couldn't really say anything like, 'What are you doing?' I just quickly moved my hand away from him, as I was close to my destination. Fortunately, I got out and firmly closed the door.

In some cases, children who are interested in a particular sport may experience assault and harassment by their sports coach in a club, swimming pool, or any other sports facility. In this regard, there is an interesting case of Amir, whose coach gained his trust and invited him to his place, which happened to be the coach's residence. Amir reports:

Amir, who was around 15-16 years old and was attending taekwondo classes, had achieved great success in the club. There was a man, apparently an assistant coach, alongside his main coach, who paid a lot of attention to him and showed such respect that he gained Amir's trust. Amir had reached a professional level and had won medals. He received support from this coach, which deepened their student-teacher relationship and created a sense of intimacy and deep trust. The coach became one of the significant figures in Amir's life, someone who would even accept his requests or pleas. It seemed like the coach was 8-9 years older than Amir. One night, when they were

supposed to go somewhere together, the coach said, 'Come to my place, I need to pick up something from home before we go to our destination.' It was a cold winter night, and when they arrived at the doorstep, after a few seconds, the coach said, 'Come upstairs, it's really cold. I couldn't find it; I need to search more to locate it.' Based on the trust he had in him, Amir went into the coach's house. He sat for a few moments while the coach continued searching until they entered a room where one of the coach's friends was waiting. Initially, they had a normal conversation, but suddenly, they both approached me, grabbed my legs, and started to assault me. They recorded this incident on video.

A child psychologist, Mrs. S, shares a story about one of her clients:

A 10 to 11-year-old boy who used to go swimming had experienced incidents throughout his swimming sessions. From one of the lifeguards, he encountered several instances of misconduct, ranging from two to three times within a month.

So, vulnerable spaces are discrete situations in time and place where sexual abuse occurs. These spaces are not effectively monitored or controlled by capable guardians. However, when the violation of boundaries extends to incestuous relationships, these spaces, which include the perpetrator's and victim's home, can become sites of abuse for years. Due to the lack of a safe and supportive environment, children are compelled to tolerate such behaviour. The spatial dimensions of rural areas, marginalized and disorganized neighbourhoods, provide a more conducive environment for abuse. These areas suffer from crowded living conditions, with multiple families residing in a single dwelling, which facilitates abuse. Narrow alleyways, dilapidated structures, and other unsupervised spaces in these neighbourhoods further contribute to the problem. In these areas, due to high levels of migration and

residential instability, social relationships weaken. In such hidden circumstances, weakened supervision and the availability of environmental factors increase the likelihood of further abuse. This does not imply that abuse does not exist in other areas and neighbourhoods, as it does. High-rise buildings and semi-public spaces, such as lobbies, elevator interiors, parking lots, and others, can also become sites of abuse.

Spaces can be transformed into vulnerable spaces in several ways:

- 1) The first factor is the socio-physical, environmental, architectural, and settlement structure and marginalization. This factor is the most tangible factor in shaping and transforming spaces into vulnerable spaces.
- 2) There are, however, hidden factors, the mental and intangible dimensions that make some spaces vulnerable and prone to abuse. Among these hidden factors, the absence of environmental rules and regulations can be mentioned, which itself reduces the possibility of supervision and control in those spaces. In fact, these spaces lack a controlling legal and civil structure that can reduce the possibility of abuse.
- 3) Another hidden factor can be referred to as an approach that exists in relatively cultural, educational, artistic, and sports spaces and was mentioned by interviewees several times. Since spaces such as schools and sports clubs and roles such as teachers and coaches, albeit more in terms of prestige than functionality, have social status and reputation in Iranian society, this ethical and cultural perspective towards these spaces and roles legitimizes them to a greater extent and may seem illogical, protecting them from mistakes and deviant acts, thereby reducing the likelihood and possibility of supervision and control. It is worth considering that the space of the home and the institution of the family, in terms of structure, roles, and functions, can be such that it exemplifies all three of these defenceless spaces that we mentioned, and in these circumstances, the

likelihood of abuse by relatives towards children and adolescents increases.

Poverty and deprivation

Poverty is associated with many undesirable social phenomena, including child sexual abuse. This does not mean that child sexual abuse does not exist among the middle and upper classes, but it can be said that it is more prevalent among the impoverished due to various reasons, causes, and mechanisms. Poverty has different forms and dimensions, such as income poverty, capability poverty, spatial poverty, relative poverty, absolute poverty, participatory poverty, and so on. In a general definition, poverty means a lack of economic and social resources.

One important consequence of poverty is deprivation of various things, such as housing, healthcare, education, and other basic standards of living that are considered fundamental needs of every human being, and many people are deprived of them. In Iran, including Tehran, there are numerous instances where the authorities' proclaimed commitment to justice has become increasingly forceful. However, despite these claims, profound manifestations of poverty persist in various settings, from the streets to marginalized areas, suburbs, and villages that often go overlooked. The severity and devastating consequences of this phenomenon are underestimated, especially in societies like Iran, where poverty is intertwined with other undesirable phenomena such as inequalities, despotic and inefficient governance, and addiction, and has created structural conditions conducive to sexual abuse.

Nowadays, the use of the terms poverty or deprivation is no longer prevalent, and new approaches have replaced them with the term 'marginalization.' Since marginalization is a multidimensional phenomenon of which poverty is only one dimension, and the aim is to move away from reductionist social concepts, the concept of marginalization, which is a multidimensional concept and always considers various dimensions and diverse forms of deprivation, is considered a suitable alternative used in new approaches.

Marginalization is a social construct that encompasses all dimensions of deprivation, including economic, social, cultural, political, emotional, and so on. When we talk about marginalization, we are observing the mechanisms of exclusion and the process through which marginalization occurs. These mechanisms are intertwined with the phenomenon of sexual abuse, which requires a deeper and multidimensional analysis of this phenomenon in order to always see its relationship with various dimensions of deprivation and its levels and layers and discuss it thoroughly.

In chapter two on theoretical literature, reference was made to several disturbing pathways through which poverty leads to sexual abuse. It was shown that poverty, through the type of housing, can impact child sexual abuse. Poor families mostly live in impoverished areas and small-sized accommodations. The small size of the house can result in children overhearing their parents' sexual activities or all family members sleeping together at night, which can lead to exposure and even assault.

In this regard, the director of a non-governmental organization stated:

The next case is a 25-year-old Iranian woman whose father is involved in addiction, and her mother is also addicted. According to the report of this 25-year-old woman, her childhood was spent in such a way that her mother was frequently arrested due for drug-related issues, and during that time, her mother was pregnant with her. Her mother was sent to prison, and this woman was born in prison. Until the age of eight, when her mother was in prison, she spent her life as a child alongside her incarcerated mother and grew up there. According to the report, when she is released from prison...

In addition to the housing component mentioned in the above narrative, another factor has been reported, which is the employment of the parents of this woman who lived in poverty. Both of them used to go to work and leave their child

alone at home. Therefore, in their absence, a neighbour's son would assault her.

The next case of poverty is narrated by Ms. M, a social activist, as follows:

I accompanied her to visit the girl's house, and when I entered, I saw that the grandmother and the child were living in a rented room.

Another component of this narrative, alongside the housing component, is the primary occupation of the child's caregiver, who engaged in child labour to make a living. With these circumstances, the child has felt discomfort from witnessing the sexual violence endured by their grandmother – a form of sexual violence against children – and has attempted to rescue their grandmother from this situation. Their only option in these circumstances has been to turn to non-governmental organizations, but without eradicating the poverty of the household head, this issue is not solvable. It requires effective support from governmental organizations, which are almost inaccessible in Iran, as the amount of support they provide is not sufficient to lift poor families out of poverty.

The following graphs also clearly demonstrate that the educational level and occupation of the respondents' parents are indicators of their economic and social status, all of which are low-status occupations with minimal education. These graphs themselves support the notion that economic deprivation is the basis and foundation of other forms of deprivation, as previously mentioned, economic deprivation influences social awareness and social interaction patterns. In the example mentioned, economic deprivation in the form of poverty led to the formation of social awareness in such a way that the grandmother of the teenager took on a form of activism that did not consider its dimensions and consequences in relation to the teenage girl.

In the same living environment, this teenager engages in prostitution, and their adolescent mind is shaped accordingly, with the intention of being able to employ compensatory mechanisms in adulthood and act as the saviour of their

grandmother. Throughout this period, they constantly experience negative emotions such as powerlessness and incapability, which become determinants and, of course, destructive in their later stages of life and actions with their environment.

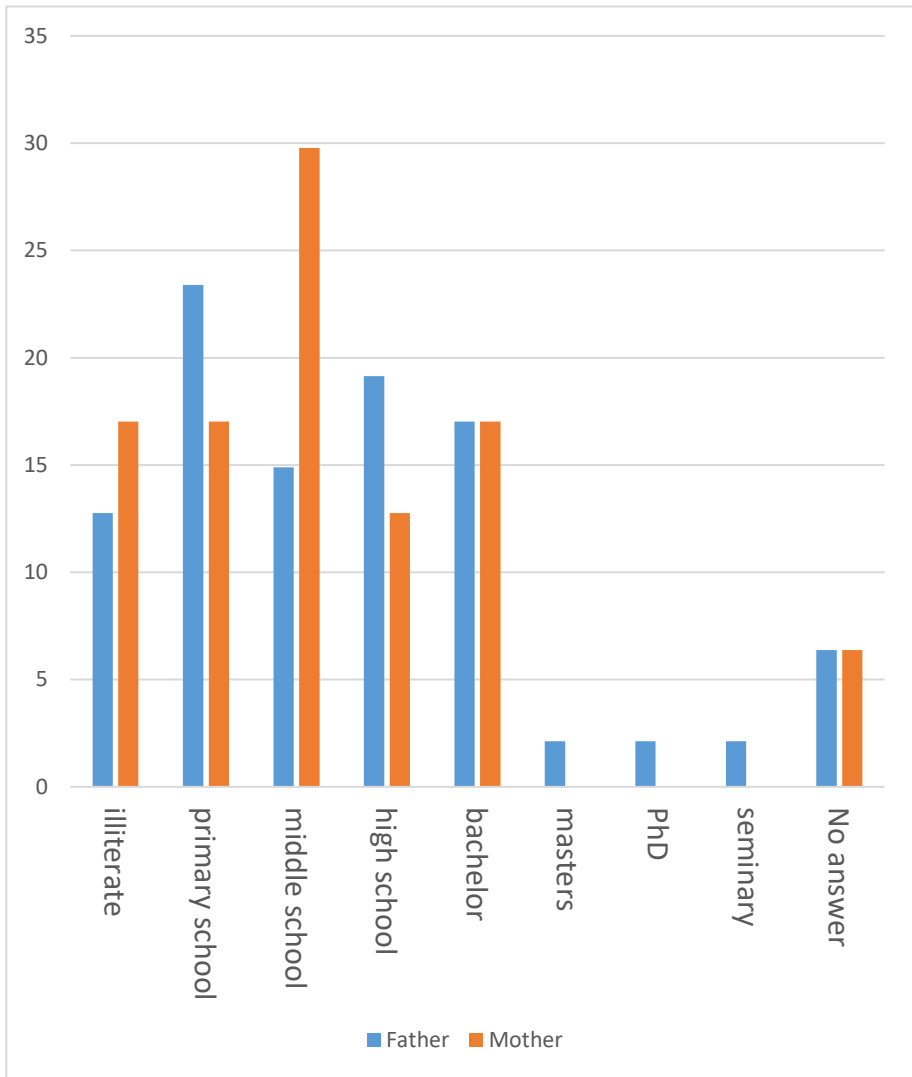


Figure 16 Distribution of respondents based on parents' education

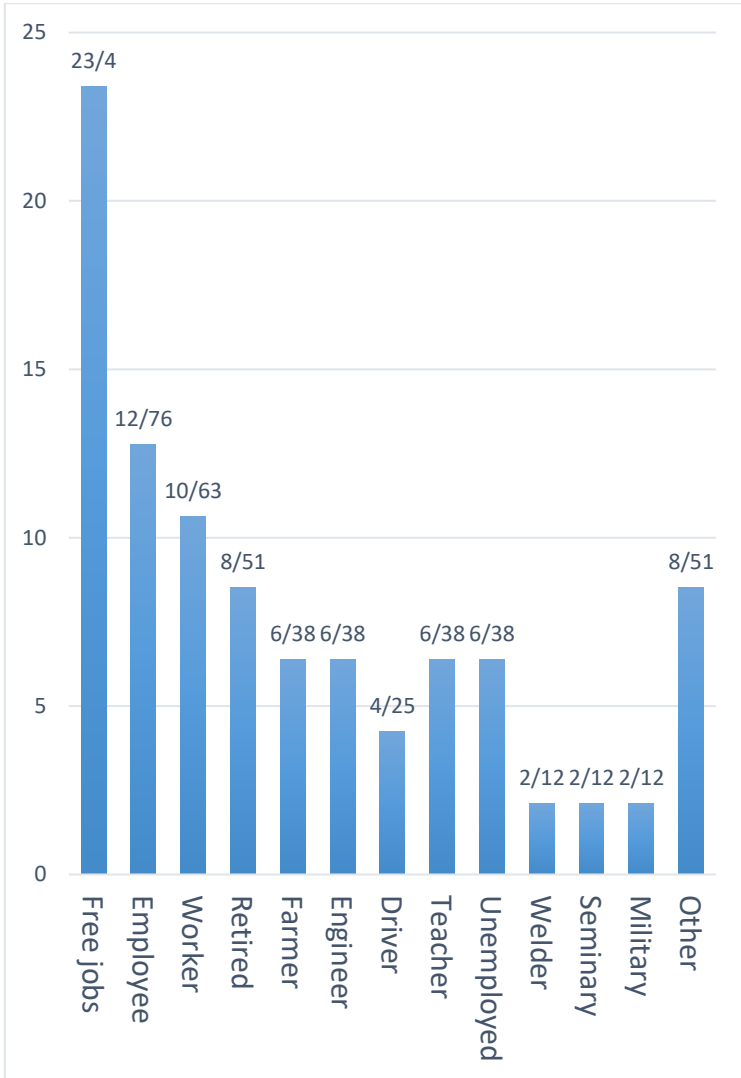


Figure 17 Distribution of respondents according to father's occupation

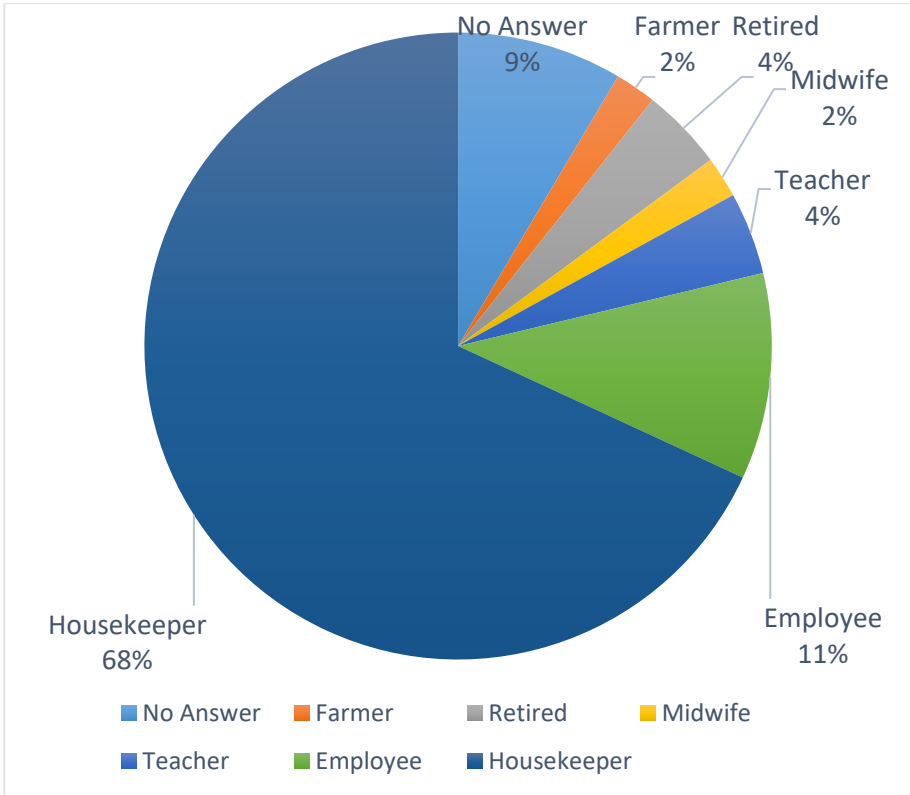


Figure 3-10. Distribution of respondents according to mother's occupation

A psychologist from the Yarigaran Institute has spoken about the neighbourhood of Darvaze Ghar and its relationship with poverty and harassment in the following terms:

In Darvaze Ghar, we have several groups, and they are mostly marginalized. There are Lors, who are divided into three subgroups: Sazani, Jozhi, and Dosti. How are they doing? They are mostly involved in smuggling activities. But they hold influence in the region. Another group is the Kurds from the northern regions. They spend two months in Tehran and two months in the north, and they keep moving back and forth. How are their children's conditions? Do they have security? They don't have any security at all. And there is also a group

of Afghans. Let me tell you something about their living conditions. They live in overcrowded houses, and many of them are vulnerable to these abuses. For example, imagine if their father is from the northern region, and their mother is an Afghan, because they all live closely intertwined, these incidents happen a lot to them. The boys from the Kurdish group cannot wear shorts until they are 16 years old. I've seen older boys, around 12-13 years old, who have nothing on them. Well, they are definitely exposed to exploitation in this situation! Well, yeah, it doesn't matter anymore. At least let them have a mirror to see the abuse they are experiencing [...]. What about their girls? They engage in relationships at a young age and get pregnant. Many of them don't have identity documents, and the lack of documents makes marriage a non-issue for them. So they might get pregnant within the family? It's not very common, but they are all interconnected. One thing they don't know is who impregnated their child. Our Kurds don't know who impregnated their child. In one household, everyone is related to each other. There is a lot of incestuous relationships here. It's possible and not surprising at all.

The other pathway through which poverty leads to sexual harassment is due to the living conditions and the neighbourhood. In these areas and neighbourhoods, such as the Darvaze Ghar neighbourhood, we encounter the spatial concentration of poverty. It has been mentioned that in areas or neighbourhoods where at least 40 or 30 percent of the residents live in poverty, poverty is concentrated there (Island and Hernandez, 2017). In these areas, families face not only the hardships of income poverty but also contend with additional challenges, including spatial disorder that arises as a consequence of spatial poverty.

In these areas, poverty, combined with other factors such as housing instability, leads to the collapse of the mechanisms of social capacity for residents to regulate their environment. In the state of this collapse, the possibility of various crimes, such as assault and harassment, increases, and the lack of identification documents for them allows the perpetrators to continue their actions more audaciously because they cannot be identified by the law, and they are not officially recognized in the country's population.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, in areas where there is severe economic deprivation and various dimensions of poverty are observed, we are confronted with diverse social groups in terms of lifestyle and subculture who are involved in social interaction and are simultaneously engaged in social conflicts and social learning from each other. The result is that in such spaces where economic deprivation is accompanied by cultural, social, emotional deprivation, etc., the likelihood of sexual harassment, including abuse, is higher due to low supervision and control. Furthermore, as a result of the predominance of deviant subcultures characterized by distinct status and value systems, individuals within these groups tend to assimilate and adopt abnormal, unethical, and uncivilized behaviours through the process of social learning within their social interactions.

Ms. M., a psychology expert, said about sexual assault in one of the marginalized areas:

A woman had come to Sannandaj from Germany to conduct field research, and when she read it to me, it said that 20% of the people living on the outskirts of Sannandaj were subjected to incestuous abuse. These individuals are under the age of 15. Who has been reported as engaging in sexual relations with them?

The director of the Tolo Bineshanha orphanage house said:

For families that live in peculiar neighbourhoods like Darvazeh Ghar area which is very dangerous around Tehran like Varamin and surrounding villages and also

migrant receiving areas, there are no supervision or education in these suburban areas. The cultural level of families is not high and similarly those who are addicted in these conditions do not have the ability to take care of children. The Welfare Organization also does not have enough facilities to be able to take care of all children. Therefore, many children experience sexual abuse and harassment until they reach puberty.

The aforementioned examples clearly demonstrate the limited social oversight and cultural education present within marginalized areas. This leads to both cultural and economic deprivation, exposing individuals to various risks. The lack of effective control and social support, characterized by weak or absent institutional performance, further contributes to social deprivation in these areas. This multidimensional deprivation, encompassing poverty, inadequate supervision, and education, perpetuates high rates of child abuse and harassment.

In the current marginalized areas of Iran, social exclusion manifests as multidimensional deprivation. This, combined with conflicts and disparities resulting from migration and cultural phenomena, gives rise to a range of social problems. Notably, one of the most significant issues is the high incidence of sexual abuse, particularly among children and adolescents. These issues and damages are interrelated and interconnected. Poverty or economic deprivation, in particular, serves as a root cause of various economic and non-economic problems, such as addiction, divorce, and theft, all of which are closely associated with sexual abuse.

According to reports from the Organization of Planning and Budget, approximately 21 million of Iran's population live in marginalized areas and neighbourhoods with inefficient structures of living (Organization of Planning and Budget, 2018, Vol. 2: 125). Just considering this figure, we can understand the structural foundation that has been formed for sexual abuse and other social issues. In the field of sociology and the approach of social disorganization theory in literature,

it has been well demonstrated how life in these areas exposes individuals to criminal activities. In these neighbourhoods and areas, due to poverty concentration, housing instability, ethnic heterogeneity, and types of housing such as 'slums' and 'informal settlements,' the residents' ability to take care of their neighbourhoods diminishes, anonymity increases, and individuals can easily exploit others, including children.

The noteworthy point is that among all social issues, including addiction, divorce, marginalization, child abuse, etc., there is a reinforcing cycle that can lead to one another. For example, addiction can lead to the collapse of the family and disruption of its structure and functions, which in turn can lead to sexual abuse. An individual who experiences abuse in this process may escape from the abuser and the suffering of abuse by leaving home and entering a cycle of homelessness and addiction.

Farnaz, a 39-year-old beneficiary of a homeless shelter house of Tehran, says:

When I was five or six years old, I experienced sexual abuse from my brother, who was 10 years older, in our own home. I hadn't told anyone about it until I came here a year and a half ago. I thought if I spoke up, even though I was young, everyone would say it's impossible. This has been the cause of my destruction, and it has truly made me even more unfortunate. It led me towards addiction and drug abuse. I've been married twice, and I can't forget, even now, and I don't think I'll ever forget it for the rest of my life.

Another area of concern is child labour. In the literature on child labour, it has been well demonstrated that poverty and deprivation are the main driving factors behind child labour. Many children, in various forms of work, whether on the streets or in workshops, are subjected to sexual abuse. The abuse can come from citizens, employers, or other children who are also engaged in labour. Sometimes employers may bring their girlfriends to the workplace and engage in sexual

relationships in the presence of children, exposing them to such scenes.

A manager from one of the branches of the Imam Ali NGO has stated:

Another factor that contributes to this is forced labour. Whether it's the working environment on the streets or those we had contact with, child sexual abuse mostly affected children who were at intersections or in workshops. One form of child abuse involves both physical and psychological aspects, which can lead to various disorders in children during their adolescence and youth. This can have lasting effects on their minds. If there is a specific case you'd like me to address, please let me know. [...] The biggest victims were the working children themselves, especially the girls I worked with at the gate of the job site. They would say, 'There is a Farhadi in such and such a passage on Valiasr Street, and it is very difficult for a child who works on the street. Not only does their family's disabled space and poverty and addiction bring them to the street, but we also witnessed that they were easily subjected to physical and sexual abuse, even before reaching womanhood. This created a situation where they would end up being prostitutes.

One of the working children narrates:

...What's this park for? We're in this park right now, walking with my sister. Many people, for example, make offers and say, 'Let's go to such and such a place, I'll give you a lot of money,' but we've never been bought. Is there anyone who gets bought? Yes, especially in the northern areas, because of this incident. Of course, half of these street vendors or at least one-third of them have boyfriends. Their boyfriends make such offers to them, and some of them

really get bought. They say, 'Let's go to such and such a place, and we'll make a good life for our family.' They actually get bought and leave.

A portion of society perceives working children as individuals who lack the ability to defend themselves and can be exploited. In other words, these children are seen as easily accessible targets without capable guardians, allowing others to harm them. Children encounter this category of individuals more frequently in various environments, increasing the likelihood of experiencing sexual abuse. In fact, in the interviews, we observe that the abusers of working children take advantage of their suppression and the dimensions of their exclusion, which exist both economically and socially and culturally. They exploit factors such as poverty, emotional voids, lack of social bonds, weakened sense of social belonging, as well as the desires and aspirations of children and adolescents, such as longing for a good family, to manipulate them for sexual abuse.

On the other hand, a review of Iran's societal policies regarding child poverty reveals that the current Iranian society, in the past decades, has not only lacked policies aimed at reducing poverty among children and adolescents but has also engaged in policy avoidance instead of policy-making. The documents, policies, and implementation plans in this area show that the policies have mostly been based on the exclusion of poor children, particularly working and street children. They have been dismissive rather than seeking ways to integrate these children into society and rebuild their connections with society. These accelerated policies have primarily focused on temporary and short-term gathering of these children with the aim of cleaning and beautifying the city space and legitimizing it, rather than addressing the issue of child poverty and the phenomenon of working and street children through structural and fundamental changes. One of the important dimensions of this problem is the sexual abuse of these children (Article: 'Policy-Making or Policy Avoidance: Child Poverty Phenomenon' by Mahnaz Alizadeh at the International Conference of the Communication Research Institute).

Another area is child marriage. Numerous studies have demonstrated the relationship between poverty and child marriage. Impoverished families, especially those with daughters, view their children as an economic burden and seek to alleviate this burden by marrying them off (Ahmady, 2017). As discussed in Chapter Two, any form of sexual relationship during childhood constitutes a form of sexual abuse and violence.

In a study, some narratives from girls who were married in childhood regarding poverty were as follows:

My father didn't have a good income. We thought that if I got married, we would be relieved of his burden. Our economic situation was very bad. We wore hand-me-down clothes from our aunt, while they wore new ones. All of this led me to get married. (Khezri, et al., 2021)

Poverty is also one of the barriers to education. Similar to child marriage, sending children to school incurs expenses for families. Some impoverished families force their children to work, preventing them from pursuing education, or the children themselves engage in work to contribute to the family's expenses. When a child is deprived of education, they miss out on acquiring essential life skills, ideally, such as self-care and the ability to resist abuse or say 'no.' The poverty of their families, especially the cultural poverty resulting from economic deprivation and oppressive structures, also hinders them from possessing the necessary skills to educate and care for their children.

It is evident that economic deprivation has had a significant impact on individual and social consciousness. With the monetization of the educational system in recent decades, a relentless process was initiated, beginning with the claim of democratizing the educational space, openly excluding a large population, particularly the lower and marginalized classes, from educational discourse and interactions. As economic issues and imbalances intensified, more segments of society were excluded and expelled from monetary education, cultural

and artistic opportunities, both from formal education and informal education that contributes to their cultural development and social awareness.

As Bourdieu puts it, symbolic violence occurred not only in the artistic sphere of society but in all cultural and educational domains, not only in formal education but in all dimensions of informal relationships concerning the weak and even middle-class segments of society. Economic deprivation was equivalent to educational and cultural deprivation, both in formal and informal structures, and had the effect of weakening self-awareness and learning skills within these classes. In essence, this points to a deficiency in the art of living and active agency, which manifested itself as the inability to care for oneself and the incapacity to care for children and adolescents by themselves and the institution of the family.

Mrs. Mima, a family counsellor and social activist, said:

When we were in the Shush kindergarten, there was a girl whose name I will tell you [...]. She was Lorraine, a beautiful girl who attended the classes at Shush kindergarten. Her father had taken her out of school and enrolled her in sewing and handicraft classes. But she was constantly abused by her father and brothers. They would beat her, and each time her clothes were torn and short. It was heartbreaking. Eventually, unfortunately, she was taken out of school very early, and she herself didn't seem to have much interest, I remember. Instead of school, she found solace in the park and befriended a group of girls her age and younger boys. Later on, they turned into a gang involved in drug distribution and prostitution.

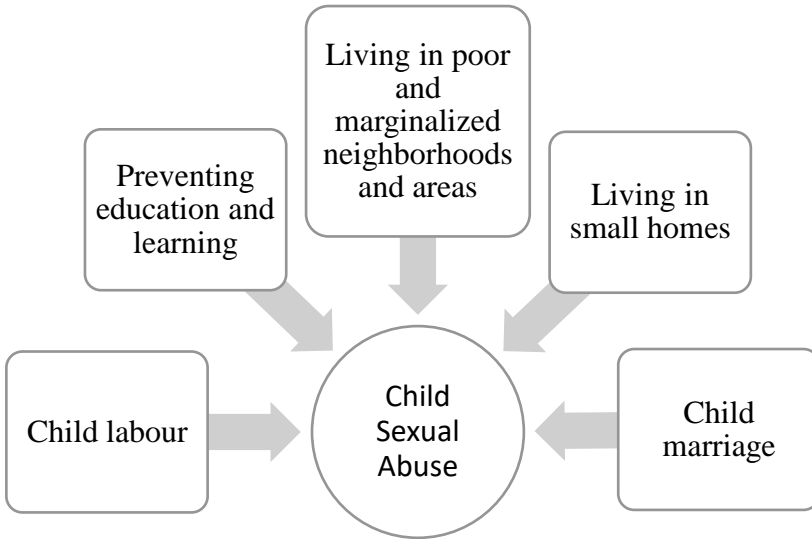


Figure 18 The relationship between some of the harmful paths of poverty and sexual abuse

The pathways of poverty and deprivation do not end with the above-mentioned cases and can encompass more than these examples. For instance, residents of impoverished communities and societies tend to be more traditional, placing a higher value on established norms and honour. When a child becomes a victim of abuse, they may receive less attention and support in order to preserve their family's honour. In some cases, in order to restore their own honour, they may even force the abused child into a marriage with the abuser, as we have observed.

Additionally, impoverished children who come from families that neglect many of their needs may be more susceptible to manipulation by abusers who offer material goods in exchange for their compliance. Poverty can lead to a divorced mother being compelled to enter into an unwanted marriage for the sake of having a provider and meeting financial needs. In such families, the risk of child sexual abuse is also higher. Negative emotions such as fear and guilt, beliefs associated with honour and social status, as well as the suppression of needs and the reward-punishment system within families affected by

economic and non-economic deprivation, are worthy of consideration. These factors contribute to the likelihood of sexual abuse within groups of children and adolescents in these families and perpetuate silence and tolerance in the face of such abuse.

According to the report by Shima Sattari, a psychologist:

One of my clients is a 40-year-old woman who experienced sexual abuse by her uncle during her adolescence. This abuse occurred repeatedly, but she remained silent because her uncle would give her money in exchange for sexual contact. This situation caused her to keep silent. According to the woman, the amount of money her uncle gave her was never received or acknowledged by her parents.

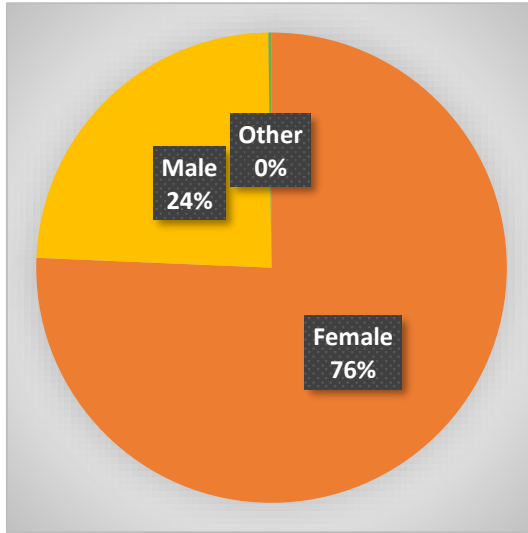


Figure 19 Distribution of respondents by gender (N=452)

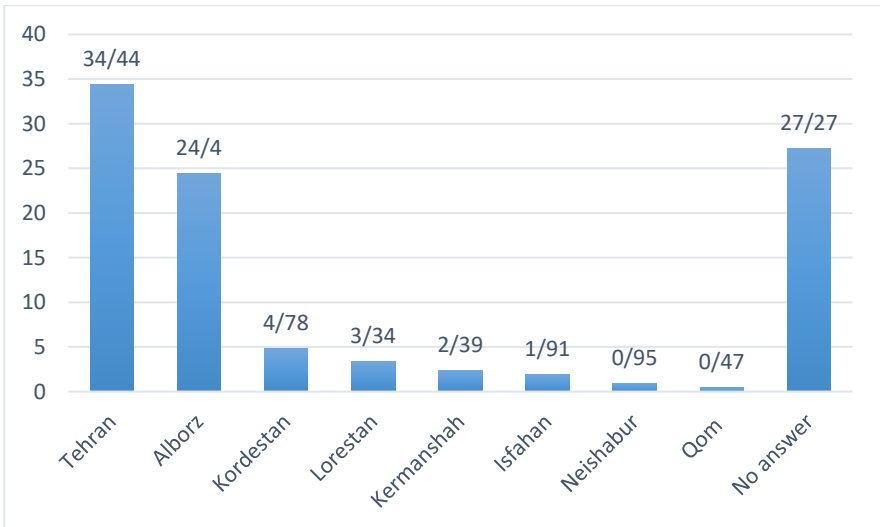


Figure 20 Distribution of respondents by city or province of residence

Ms. B, the psychologist, reported:

The next case reported by Ms. Bahboodi involves a seven-year-old Iranian boy whose father is a labourer and mother is illiterate. He has been sexually assaulted by his 18-year-old cousin about 3 to 4 times.

Mr. Abhariyan, a university professor and director of the rehabilitation group, has mentioned various types of abusers:

In densely populated families and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, they talk about abuse by strangers, transient individuals, and, after these, even relatives and close acquaintances.

Ms. Ismaili, a painting instructor in non-governmental organizations, has reported:

Moreover, this person was very eager to take the children to swimming pools from various places, such as municipal pools, and provide them with free swimming cards. She would take many children to the swimming pool, including a trip to Mashhad, and after this trip, some of these children approached Ms. Ismaili and reported these incidents of sexual abuse and assault by this individual on various boys.

Ms. B has stated:

The second case involves a 7-year-old girl reported by her mother. In their home, there are two daughters, with the reported girl being the older one. She has a 4-year-old sister, and both of their parents are illiterate. Since the age of one, she has witnessed all the instances of her father's self-gratification. Meaningful sexual touches from her father started when she was one and a half years old. Her father would touch her private parts. When the mother tells him not to do this, he says he can't control himself and that it's beyond his control.

This child has experienced these incidents repeatedly from her father until the age of two.

Ms. B has reported the next case again as follows:

An Iranian seven-year-old boy with a four-year-old working-class father and an illiterate mother has been subjected to sexual abuse by his 18-year-old uncle about 3 to 4 times [...] They all lived together in one house, along with the uncle. They lived on different floors, with the uncle on the upper floor. The 18-year-old uncle would invite the boy upstairs under the pretext of playing games [...] The incident becomes apparent to the mother at a moment when she realizes that the boy's clothes are wet and the wetness is different.

Legal structure of abuse: legal vacuums and existing law issues

Until the enactment of the Law on Protection of Children and Adolescents in 2020, there was no specific law regarding the protection of sexually abused children, punishment of offenders, and even support for them to prevent recurring abuse. However, the enactment of this law covered some of the gaps in this area. Previously, the basis for dealing with child sexual abuse, especially incest, was the Islamic Penal Code. But there is still room for reflection and concern regarding the implementation of these laws by committed and compassionate executors, as well as ongoing monitoring of the private sector and non-governmental organizations to ensure the enforcement of these laws is necessary and essential.

This topic is addressed in the second book, specifically in the chapter on adultery. Before delving into these laws, the participants' perspectives on the laws are reviewed. This perspective does not necessarily indicate the absence of existing laws but rather their orientation towards child abuse laws, which is noteworthy. With the review and categorization of participants' perspectives, three main themes have emerged

in this area, namely the lack of legal support, non-enforcement of law provisions, and the patriarchal position in the laws.

Some participants believe that there are no specific laws regarding the protection of sexually abused children or sexual abuse itself. However, it should be noted that since the Law on Protection of Children and Adolescents has recently been enacted, it is natural that interviewees who were interviewed in 2020 (2020) may not be aware of its existence. In practice, suitable procedures and mechanisms for the implementation of laws have not been designed and implemented to achieve their realization. In many cases, even existing laws are not enforced.

Ms. Esmaeili, a painting teacher and instructor in several non-governmental organizations, has stated:

It became evident from the case of Mr. Saeed Tousi that there is no law in this country.

Ms. Esmaeili refers to Mr. Saeed Tousi, a famous Quran reciter who has been accused of sexually abusing some of his students. Despite the public exposure of this case and multiple complaints against him, he was ultimately acquitted. Many pieces of evidence indicate 'clear interference in the judicial process' of this case.

The founder and president of the Iranian AIDS Society has stated:

In the book 'Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders' or DSM-5, which is used for classifying psychiatric disorders, there are various classifications, and child abuse is considered a crime worldwide, except in Iran, of course, which we should consider as an exception. It is very strange that in Iran, it is not regarded as a crime. One important thing about child abuse, which I call paedophilia, a commonly observed phenomenon, is that there is a significant difference between reported cases and actual occurrences. Many of these cases are never

reported, and about 70% of them are never reported in such situations.

Mrs. M., a psychologist in the city of Sanandaj, has spoken about the difficulty and even impossibility of proving sexual assault in legal proceedings. She recounted a case involving a young woman who was hesitant to marry. The woman's reluctance stemmed from a disturbing situation: her cousin's son had allegedly planned to sexually assault her with the help of three of his friends.

Only one person came to me and spoke about the harasser over the phone. I am pursuing the matter through legal channels. They said, 'If you can prove that I committed assault, I am at your service and I will tell the truth,' because they could have claimed that it was consensual with their friend. You know there is no law in Iran to defend against them, and there is no refuge.

Mr. Riyazati, a lawyer, draws attention to the deficiencies in the laws regarding child abuse and the progress made in the law. In his view, one of the major deficiencies is the lack of effective punishment for fathers and grandfathers who commit murder, which stems from a flawed jurisprudential interpretation. If a father kills his own child, there is no effective punishment provided for him, which is a sign of paternal dominance in Iranian laws rooted in jurisprudence. According to Mr. Riyazati, significant progress has been made in protecting children's rights through the recently enacted Children and Adolescents Protection Act:

According to the law, child abuse is considered a public crime and does not require a private complainant. This means that anyone who witnesses a case of child abuse can report it, and the prosecutor, as the public plaintiff, must pursue the matter. The maximum punishment provided for in this law is 6 months of imprisonment and a fine of 1 million Tomans. While the enactment of

this law was considered a significant step in helping child victims, it still has many shortcomings. The most significant challenge in this regard is regarding the murder of a child by their father. Article 220 of the Islamic Penal Code states, 'A father or paternal grandfather who kills their child shall not be subject to retribution but shall be obligated to pay the blood money to the heirs of the victim and shall be subject to discretionary punishment.' This discretionary punishment is also based on Article 612 of the Islamic Penal Code, which states that if someone is sentenced to retribution and that sentence is waived due to public interest, they shall be sentenced to imprisonment for a period of three to ten years. The exemption of fathers and paternal grandfathers from retribution has its roots in certain interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, which does not include mothers. This article has led some fathers to abuse it and has resulted in many cases where criminals have escaped appropriate punishment.

A specialist neurologist recounts a case that demonstrates the features of structural and cultural violence in the form of patriarchy in the law. The question raised here is how the law addresses the issue when a child is sexually abused by a close relative and becomes pregnant. Their narrative provides an answer to our question. Additionally, cultural violence is concerned with the illegitimacy or, in other words, the 'illegitimate' status of these children. This violence not only deprives them of social and economic opportunities but also ostracizes them from society, leaving them devoid of a secure life.

The first phenomenon I witnessed in the emergency room was a 14-year-old girl brought to me with abdominal pain. Upon examination, we noticed prominence in the abdominal area, and it became

evident that she did not have a husband or fiancé. I was in an emergency room in one of the cities, and it was strange that they either marry off a 14-year-old or they don't, there is no middle ground. We performed an ultrasound and suspected it might be a tumour, but we saw a foetus. The girl sat down and cried, and we brought her poor mother, who was afraid of the father, to remove the foetus. We informed legal authorities and entrusted her to them. However, the unfortunate thing was that the girl had no right to terminate the pregnancy, and the father had the authority, and ultimately, he should be penalized. I still don't know what happened to the girl because they took her out of our jurisdiction, and this pain, as a physician, makes me feel helpless. How much power does the law have, and what kind of law allows such injustice and deals with it so leniently? I don't know what it understands. Then the same law calls this child 'special' and 'illegitimate.' Even from a religious standpoint, this child encounters difficulties. There is no protective law in this regard.

The above discourse critically examines a recurring cycle in which the failure to punish close relatives who commit sexual offenses is justified by a gender-biased discourse originating from a prevailing patriarchal culture in society. Furthermore, the economic discourse, manifested through the conversion of punishment into monetary fines, collaborates with this cultural narrative that perceives fathers as owners of children, effectively suspending and absolving the legal discourse from effectively criminalizing sexual abuse. This suspension, in turn, perpetuates the cycle of sexual abuse (specifically incest) by neglecting the implementation of preventive policies and legal measures from a comprehensive legal and judicial standpoint.

The result of these trends and processes is the emergence of an individual who, through the same society that has given rise to it through prevailing discourses, is labelled as an illegitimate

woman. In this context, the religious discourse stigmatizes an individual as being illegitimate due to their birth outside of wedlock, consequently denying their legitimacy and dehumanizing them within the legal framework. As a result, social and economic institutions, influenced by this religious-legal void, refrain from offering social support and economic security through welfare programs and provisions. In fact, the illegitimate child, constructed by the culture and social relations of society, is rejected by the very same society, which does not assume any responsibility towards it. Thus, the absence of support in this stage is also legitimized. This cycle, as described in the realm of sexual abuse laws, will always have flawed consequences.

Ms. K, a graduate in the field of women's studies and an activist for women and children, has mentioned several fundamental issues in the law that have caused harm to child victims of sexual abuse. The first issue is the lack of legal protection for child victims of sexual abuse. As children do not receive effective support, they often do not report their experiences of abuse. Even if they do report it, they are often rejected by their families due to the lack of legal protection, which further exposes them to vulnerabilities. Another issue is patriarchal norms within the law, which has been addressed. Lastly, a serious issue in the law is child marriages or child spousal arrangements, which are a form of structural violence.

According to the law, marriages under the age of 15 for boys and under the age of 13 for girls are permissible, stating: 'The marriage contract of a girl before reaching the age of 13, according to the solar calendar, and a boy before reaching the age of 15, according to the solar calendar, is conditional upon the consent of the guardian, subject to the court's approval based on the best interests.' Therefore, Iranian law does not specify a particular age for marriage, allowing even a ten-year-old girl or younger to be married. Evidence shows that thousands of girls in childhood are married annually.

Any sexual relationship established at such a young age is a form of child abuse. Ms. K has stated:

Well, their opinion has been that through the years of their experience, they have realized that the current existing law in the country is full of numerous shortcomings. It not only fails to provide support but also demonstrates a biased approach against the affected individuals. Their opinion reflects that the governing law in Iran is highly gendered, which means that discussions about the law, especially regarding sexual violence, are often silenced and the victim themselves may suffer more harm. Not only does the disclosure of such matters lack support, but it also leads to disrespect and potential expulsion from the family when the victim returns home. The victim is often blamed and told that they brought disgrace upon the family. You see how problematic these issues of sexual abuse and honour killings are, and even worse, child marriages and marriages at an age that is neither acceptable nor comprehensible. Well, this is directly violence and sexual assault, yet the law continues to support such a sexual phenomenon.

The lack of specific laws and the absence of supportive institutions for sexual abuse victims have resulted in them not only lacking protection but also being expelled by their families if they disclose the assault. There are no inclusive processes or integration mechanisms for these individuals in society; rather, they face further rejection and exacerbation of the consequences of expulsion. Due to the patriarchal nature of the family, honour, and reputation, individuals are expelled by this institution, so they prefer to remain silent or resort to other forms of harm, such as child marriages, child spousal arrangements, or forced marriages. They may also experience other forms of harm, such as self-selling, running away from home, addiction, and more.

Family-based policies of expulsion (based on honour and denial) and Iranian society's approach (due to the lack of an effective civil and legal structure that supports and

acknowledges the issue) have not only failed to prevent this harm through integration and connection of the affected individuals with society but have also intensified the damage and created other social problems that are employed by these individuals as defensive and avoidance mechanisms. Both Iranian families and society share a mechanism in dealing with the issue of sexual abuse by relatives, and that mechanism is denial, which has been present in all situations and across all social layers.

The director of the Tolo Bineshanha Children's House has brought up another issue regarding the enforcement of the law. She has specifically highlighted the behaviour of law enforcement officials, who not only fail to uphold the law but also create various obstacles for child welfare activists. When asked about their familiarity with the laws, she responded:

On paper, yes, but God knows about the actual implementation. When we try to address these issues, we face unexpected resistance, even from within the institution itself. They question why we are shedding light on these matters in the first place. Unfortunately, such things are simply not acknowledged or addressed in Iran.

The previous discussion addressed several major issues in the field of law from the perspective of participants, and the law regarding the age of marriage, which legitimizes child abuse, was reviewed. Below, several other laws will be reviewed to clarify conflicts and contradictions.

One of the fundamental aspects of Iranian law is the concept of childhood and the age period it encompasses. In various laws in Iran, depending on the subject or age, no specific law is considered for children, or we witness different age determinations. For example, in marriage law, we see a specific age for marriage, or in labour law, we see a minimum age of 15 for starting work, or in the law on the protection of children and adolescents, all individuals under the age of 18 are subject to the law. Additionally, three terms, 'child,' 'infant,' and

‘adolescent,’ are used to refer to the childhood period, indicating the lack of consensus among lawmakers in this area.

The lack of clear boundaries between the childhood period and the phenomenon of adolescence has led to the emergence of issues and problems, as well as the emergence of new dimensions in the issue of sexual abuse within families. Because the phenomenon of childhood, in terms of nature and structure, is different from the phenomenon of adolescence, treating them as the same entity in policies related to sexual abuse by relatives will only exacerbate the problem and give rise to new dimensions.

Specifically, the issue of child sexual abuse is addressed in the Islamic Penal Code and the Law on the Protection of Children and Adolescents. In the Islamic Penal Code, the issue of punishment is raised. In this law, the age of a child is determined to be 15 years. For example, in Article 88, it is stated, ‘Regarding children and adolescents who commit disciplinary offenses and are between the ages of nine and fifteen at the time of the offense, the court shall make one of the following decisions...’. The first chapter of the second section addresses the issue of adultery. Article 221 states, ‘Adultery refers to the sexual intercourse between a man and a woman who are not married to each other and there is no valid excuse.’ In the second clause of the same article, it is stated, ‘If either or both parties are minors, adultery is established, but the minor is not punished and is subject to preventive and educational measures specified in the first book of this law.’ Article 224 enumerates the punishment for adultery in some cases, including adultery with close relatives, which may result in execution.

According to Article 91 of the law, adultery must be proven by the testimony of four just men or three just men and two just women, and can result in the punishment of lashing or stoning. This law presents several concerns. Firstly, it establishes the age of childhood as 15 years, while numerous international documents, to which Iran is a signatory, define the age of childhood as 18 years. Secondly, the imposition of the death penalty in such cases not only fails to deter such crimes but also contradicts principles of human dignity, suggesting the need

for the implementation of restorative justice as an alternative approach. Additionally, a significant issue arises when trying to prove adultery involving close relatives. Historical evidence demonstrates that in certain instances, the victims themselves are wrongly regarded as perpetrators, as highlighted by Maljoo in his *Sexual Reason*.

In the Law on the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents, this issue is addressed not in the context of adultery with close relatives but in topics such as sexual abuse, indecency, obscenity, imminent and severe danger, and pornography, to the extent that any form of child abuse in these cases leads to intervention. At the beginning of this law, we encounter highly ambiguous concepts in the realm of childhood. For example, the definition of a child states, 'Any individual who has not reached the age of legal maturity.' If the intended age of legal maturity is 9 years for girls and 15 years for boys, we witness gender discrimination. The definition of an adolescent is also as follows: 'Any individual under the age of eighteen, according to the complete solar calendar year, who has reached the age of legal maturity.'

The fact that this law is based on religious law has fundamental flaws. Article 2 also states, 'All individuals who have not reached the age of eighteen according to the complete solar year are subject to this law.' Although all individuals under 18 years are subject to this law, the exact age of childhood is not defined, and there are many confusing terms in this area. Furthermore, various punishments for abusers and the methods of intervention to protect the victims are determined. Although this law is more progressive compared to other laws in this area, it still has multiple issues concerning definitions in this field.

Establishing progressive and supportive laws for abused children is crucial, yet in Iran, two significant challenges hinder their effectiveness. Firstly, even if the law itself is progressive and supportive, its impact remains limited if adequate mechanisms for implementation are not established. Unfortunately, many laws in practice become mere documents without tangible enforcement. Secondly, the implementation of the Law on the Protection of Children and Adolescents relies

on various executive bodies, including the judiciary, welfare organizations, and law enforcement agencies. These entities have been designated with the responsibility of executing the law.

Despite the significant expansion of social emergency services as one of the supporting institutions for children in recent years, it faces serious challenges. One of the serious issues is the problem of financial resources, to the extent that its employees may not receive their salaries for several months, or they face various infrastructure issues such as lack of facilities for the care of children, which still creates a conducive environment for their abuse. In many cases, abused children are handed over to their families who have subjected them to abuse, which again exposes them to further harm.

Another important issue is the social and economic infrastructure for law enforcement in society. If these infrastructures are not in place, the law alone will be almost ineffective. In Iran, these infrastructures are by no means available. For example, we witness poverty, inequality, the collapse or weakening of institutions such as the family, the reduction of traditional social capital, and the lack of formation of new social capital. Undesirable structural characteristics in neighbourhoods such as poverty and housing instability are prevalent. These characteristics have led to widespread social damage, including sexual child abuse. Even if the law is progressive in this context, it will lack any significant impact.

To summarize, it is evident that the enacted laws regarding sexual abuse and the protection of victims are contingent and dependent on other factors and structures that need to be considered. The organizations involved in the implementation of these laws, among other structural issues, are crucial and, as evident in the current Iranian society, these organizations themselves face various internal and external structural challenges that hinder their effective and desirable functioning in this area. Some internal structural issues, for example, include weaknesses in the rights and benefits of human resources working in these organizations, which affect their motivation.

Additionally, bureaucratic red tape within the organizations and external structural issues such as job duplication, overlapping responsibilities among these organizations, and the allocation of resources and budgets by the government structure to address these issues can be mentioned. Other factors include contextual and developmental issues in society, such as social welfare policies, social security, healthcare, education, marginalization, and sexual matters.

As more deficiencies and weaknesses occur in these contextual policies, we will not only witness a lack of improvement but also an exacerbation of issues such as sexual abuse and incest within the family institution. Furthermore, the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the laws that are enacted in this regard will be compromised, leading to further challenges in their implementation.

The social worker at Nasser Khosrow Children's Home reported:

He has assaulted this girl three or four times and had informed her grandmother about it. They had pursued the matter, gone to court, and received compensation from that man.

Another form of abuse occurs in the form of child marriage. It can be said that the consequences of this abuse are also severe because it has both a structural dimension and occurs within the institution of kinship. In many cases, children are forced to endure such relationships for several years. This harm has a structural dimension in that children, especially girls, are compelled to engage in such relationships within the framework of traditional norms, poverty, and religious laws. In other words, this form of abuse is manifested within the framework of legitimate laws and traditions. In many cases, the child has no desire to have such a relationship but is forced to comply with it.

One of the experts in this field stated:

You see, many children have no understanding of marriage at this age. A child who is 9, 14, or even 17

years old does not have any comprehension of marriage. Some of them don't even know that sexual relations exist within marriage. For example, I had a case where a girl told her husband that if he loves her, he shouldn't engage in sexual relations with her. There was another case where a girl became pregnant and thought she had just gained weight. They have no understanding at all. And when they enter into sexual relationships, it is against their will and desire, and they are forced to comply with it.

Institutional Factors

Structural and functional issues within the family

Disrupted families manifest in diverse forms, such as divorced families, single-parent households, households led by women (although not all of these households are necessarily disordered, they differ structurally), families with step-parents and step-children, conflict-ridden families, families with heads struggling with addiction, families with incarcerated or absent heads, populous and extended families, families with significant age gaps between parents and children, families coping with the loss of a parent, and families involved in criminal activities, among others. Each of these forms highlights the varied and complex nature of disrupted family structures and dynamics.

Importantly, however, not all of these family types are always conducive to abuse, but the likelihood of abuse is higher within these families. This form of family does not necessarily belong to a specific socio-economic class; it exists across all social strata because the human bonds and the meaningful and effective nature of family are not reducible to economic factors. Disordered families and families lacking parenting skills can exist among all social classes.

Ineffective parenting practices refer to the way families raise their children. First and foremost, it should be noted that parenting is a unitary or microsystem aspect of the family

system, and child rearing is its outcome. Ideally, parents need to reach an agreement on topics such as moral values, behavioural expectations and discipline, children's emotional needs, educational standards and priorities, security, and relationships with peers, and select appropriate practices in these areas (Feinberg, 2009). Schofield and Bee have divided positive parenting into four dimensions, which seem to align with attachment theory and theories of resilience in children:

1. Building self-confidence,
2. Enhancing reflective functioning,
3. Boosting self-esteem, and
4. Fostering independence.

They reported that this self-confidence is vital for healthy emotional engagement of children since all children require caregivers who are available, reliable, aware of their needs, and prepared to provide necessary care and protection (Schofield & Beek, 2005). Risk factors consistently identified in the literature in this field have been grouped into several pervasive factors, including:

1. Weak parent-child relationship,
2. Poor parenting skills, such as excessive criticism, harsh discipline, inconsistency, and permissiveness,
3. Environmental instability, which includes low socio-economic status, low parental education, disadvantaged minority status, and child maltreatment, and
4. Excessive parental conflict and discord.

Inadequate parenting skills, characterized by harsh, critical, and inconsistent parenting styles associated with authoritarian approaches, have been recognized as a defining feature (Dodge et al., 2006). These styles can negatively impact parent-child interactions, emotional well-being, and overall development.

In terms of structural aspects, the major types of dysfunctional families identified in this study include patriarchal and religious families, divorced families, single-parent households due to death or separation, households where the head of the family is incarcerated, large and extended families, households lacking suitable parental figures, families with stepfathers or

stepmothers, and children living with step-parents or non-biological parents.

Other factors include the death of the mother and living with non-biological parents, polygamous Iranian fathers and living with non-siblings, and significant age differences between parents. In Iran, the divorce rate has significantly increased over the past decade, from 94,039 divorces in 2006 to 179,049 divorces in 2016 and 171,246 divorces in 2019. This increase in divorce rates can create a basis for family dysfunction and consequently sexual abuse. Divorce results in children living with only one parent for certain periods of time. In such circumstances, the parent may be less able to take care of the children and may delegate their care to others. Divorce also puts a financial strain on the couple, forcing them to work more and potentially leaving the children at home or in the care of others. In some cases, even after divorce, parents may engage in abusive behaviours. The following quotes all indicate the role of divorce in sexual violence.

A 27-year-old female student said:

I can't digest the fact that my father was aroused by me and through my body. How is that possible? You know how beautiful my mother is? Even though they never had a good relationship, these days my father is completely out of control.

In some cases, when parents get divorced and live separately, they have to work to support the high living expenses. They no longer have much time to dedicate to their children and take care of them. Sometimes they have to entrust them to others, which creates an opportunity for sexual abuse. Mr. Riyazati, whose profession is law, stated:

It is common for children of divorce to experience such situations where they are passed from one place to another. They are sometimes left with neighbours or the husband's brother. This often happens in practice.

Psychologist at Tolo Bineshanha Warm House said:

A 42-year-old woman whose parents divorced when she was a child. Her mother took custody of the child and they left Iran. The mother remarried in the new country, and the stepfather started contacting this young lady. She was 13 years old at the time, and his contact caused her a lot of distress and harm, to the extent that she informed her mother. However, the mother did not pay attention, and despite being aware of her stepfather's misconduct, the first few days were spent with indifference. But the story reached a point where the mother herself got involved and became part of a threesome sexual relationship. This continued until the lady turned 17, and at this age, she had the option to ask her father to bring her back to Iran. But until the age of 17, she was forced to serve her stepfather with the cooperation and consent of her mother. She then returned to Iran, but turned to addiction and drug abuse, eventually being expelled from her paternal family. Now she has sought refuge at the Tolo Bineshanha Centre.

The next case is described by Ms. J, a psychologist and social activist. It is about a child whose mother passed away, and her father sexually abused her for several years.

She was in fifth grade and 11 years old. She had been subjected to abuse since childhood, and when she made a phone call, she said, 'If you don't give me the address of the organization, I will throw myself under a truck or car.' We provided her with the address, and the agency brought her to the organization. I remember it was in the Jannat Abad area. She said, 'My father has been doing this to me since I was a child. I thought all fathers did this.' Later, I realized that the other children I grew up with were only being abused by my father. Her mother had passed away, and she was living alone

with her father. I took her to the forensic physician myself, and I saw that she was telling the truth. The last incident happened on a Friday night.

A 26-year-old woman named Fatemeh shared her childhood experience, saying:

I feel disgusted, I really hate it. I remember I didn't know the meaning of the inappropriate touching from my stepfather at that moment. I didn't know what this bad feeling was. I felt confused. There were times when we went to the beach, and he would carry me in the water and touch me inappropriately, clinging to me tightly. At that time, I thought he was my real father, but he wasn't. When my mother separated from him, she told me that he is listed as my father in my birth certificate, but he is not my biological father. When I was born, she had already divorced him and remarried.

A 37-year-old hairdresser who had this incident happen to one of her customers:

A woman used to leave her 6-year-old son with her stepfather, who lived in their neighbourhood, while she went to work. For a while, the child had unexplained nausea, and after a medical examination, suspicions of oral penetration arose. To ensure what had happened, she sent the child back to her stepfather's house again, leaving them alone under the pretence of work. However, she returned home after a few minutes and realized the relationship between the stepfather and the child. She pursued legal action and this incident became the cause of her separation from her spouse.

These narratives reveal how fragile families can be in today's world and how those that become dysfunctional or broken can become a breeding ground for abuse, especially against

the most vulnerable individuals, namely children, by their closest relatives such as fathers, uncles, mothers, brothers, and others. Hence, we see that this institution, at times, not only fails to provide a safe haven for its members, especially children, but also jeopardizes their safety due to sexual abuse. This issue is not only prevalent among divorced families but can occur in various types of families, including religious ones. The belief that being religious can serve as a breeding ground for abuse is not supported objectively. However, it is acknowledged that child sexual abuse can occur within any type of family, including religious families. The founder and president of the Iranian AIDS Association stated:

In our country, religious and cultural beliefs have contributed to the prevalent usage of the term 'adultery.' Since last year, through our interactions with policymakers who are deeply religious, the focus on social harms, including religious ones, remains prominent in institutions such as the Welfare Organization, the Anti-Drug Headquarters, and the Presidential Office. One of their concerns, which was raised in the Supreme Council of the country when I was a member there, was the issue of incestuous relationships. Interestingly, the statistics they provided on incestuous relationships were highly confidential. It was found to be more prevalent in religious families than in families with a weaker religious background.

One of the factors that can lead to incestuous relationships and sexual abuse within religious families is that due to the restrictions imposed by these families, they are constantly faced with the suppression of emotions and needs. This sexual and sexual identity suppression can contribute to a level of arousal and encouragement towards sexual experiences, which becomes a common occurrence within this structure.

In another narrative, we address the issue of seemingly functional families that can become a breeding ground for abuse, even by trusted individuals within the family or even

immediate family members towards children. A family institution can lack any specific and expressed issues (such as addiction, divorce, neglect, etc.) structurally, but that does not necessarily mean it is balanced. There are many families that are either rigid and controlling or permissive and neglectful, and both types of families are susceptible to providing a suitable environment for sexual abuse. By rigid and controlling families, we refer to families where individuals face challenges in terms of freedom of action and identity independence. Authoritarian, non-participatory, and non-sharing families fall into this category, which are not uncommon in current Iranian society.

Permissive or neglectful families are characterized as households where there is an excessive and unjustifiable degree of freedom, coupled with a sense of irrationality and neglect. In these families, there are also problems with task division and participation, and the sense of emotional attachment and belonging to the family institution is weakened in a different way. Both types of families mentioned provide a suitable environment for the occurrence and perpetuation of sexual abuse and incestuous relationships because in each of them, the emotions and needs of individuals are suppressed or responded to in an unbalanced manner, and one of the most significant consequences of this imbalance and lack of control by the family institution can be the occurrence of sexual abuse and incestuous relationships.

Dr Abhariyan, a specialist in neurology, says:

Since our patients did not directly come for abuse-related issues, we cannot say for certain about treatment. However, undoubtedly, the negative psychological and emotional impact is more severe when this issue occurs at a younger age and involves close relatives. We cannot say exactly how many times it has occurred, but unfortunately, it is not a one-time occurrence in these individuals. It has happened repeatedly until it is exposed, and it is a very horrifying experience that sends shivers down one's spine. If I

were to share personal experiences, the abusers are usually neighbours, someone trusted by the family, especially the mother, and someone who had a close relationship. This neighbour issue happens a lot, and then we have the issue of relatives. Those who talk about strangers and passing individuals in families with larger populations and lower socioeconomic areas, and after that, we have the issue of relatives. We see these things in a strange and unbelievable way. Now, we even see cases involving stepbrothers and uncles, and even fathers and grandfathers, but these are individuals who had psychological disorders and addictions. I have not seen it happen when there are no underlying disorders. It also happens with husband's relatives and sisters; they are all trusted family members, and it occurs from their side as well.

Dr Abhariyan referred to important points regarding sexually abused individuals in the damaged society of Iran. These individuals have never sought treatment specifically for sexual abuse; instead, they have sought help for other psychological disorders and symptoms that have roots in their childhood experiences. Throughout their growth and aging, they have never actively pursued treatment. Of course, there are numerous reasons why individuals do not disclose their experiences. As shown in many studies, 80% of sexually abused individuals have never disclosed their experiences, even in societies where this phenomenon is not considered taboo. It is likely that the psychological implications of confronting these memories are distressing and undesirable for them, and individuals prefer to ignore them among their past memories.

Another important point is the signs of abusers. These signs, based on their personal experiences, are often overlooked by the primary caregivers of the child, including close relatives and neighbours who are trusted by the mother. They also mentioned abusers who have psychological disorders and

addictions, increasing the likelihood of more frequent instances of sexual abuse in the presence of the child.

Although research has shown that anyone can be an abuser, in our religious context, we encounter gender-based role divisions, where men or fathers are seen as the owners of everything, including family members and other assets. It can be said that religious families are patriarchal families, and in these families, the man is the owner of everything. Children and other family members do not have the right to protest against him, and if they do, they are punished.

Morris Setudegan, a psychotherapist, said:

Just now, we saw a woman in Kurdistan who divorced her husband after a year and a half. She confronted her mother and said that her brother had repeatedly abused her. Her mother confronted her brother and uncle, and they apologized, but they also told her that it was her fault because she should have observed her hijab at that time [...] Imagine that at the age of 35, they are still struggling with psychologists and such. Not to mention those young people who grew up in relatively patriarchal and religious families in our small Kurdistan, like Sistan and Baluchestan, who couldn't even say that their father was abusing them. They carry a heavy burden of guilt from a religious and systemic-cultural perspective.

Religious families, due to the suppression and disregard of individuals' emotions and needs manifested in the form of imposed restrictions, can provide a breeding ground for the encouragement and arousal of sexuality, and consequently, sexual abuse and incest. Individuals in religious families, as they learn and internalize emotions such as sin and shame, can experience even more intense emotional shame and guilt after experiencing abuse. They are then labelled as the instigators by others and even by themselves, and the guilt becomes internalized, and the mechanism of conscience punishment emerges within the individual.

These negative emotions arise from the religious and cultural structure of the family and, of course, are derived from the religious society, which diminishes the victimized individual's position and attributes blame to the perpetrator. This can lead the abused individual to blame themselves for the sin and choose silence in the face of abuse and its continuation, always being in constant internal turmoil. In a way, the abused individual in this situation has been transformed into a victim of power relations.

Family size and socioeconomic status can also contribute to the vulnerability of individuals to abuse. Numerous studies have shown that poverty is associated with higher fertility rates. For example, in Iran, where the fertility rate has significantly decreased, it remains higher in provinces such as Sistan and Baluchestan and South Khorasan, which are relatively poorer.

One reason why poor parents have more children is the expectation that their children will provide support in their old age. These families not only lack sufficient resources to meet the needs of their children, leading to neglect and child abuse, but a larger number of children can also strain the family's resources. These families often lack clear strategies for raising their children, and they may be overwhelmed, increasing the likelihood of abuse.

Furthermore, having a large number of family members can both provide a potential environment for abuse and act as a protective factor in some situations. For example, Mrs. B shared a story about an Afghan child who was being abused by her uncle, saying:

They told me about a case, the first one was a 6-year-old girl named Zahra from Afghanistan. They said she would get sick, and they would take her to the doctor, but they believed that the family was not supportive. They considered the family ineffective and stated that all the medical support came from the centre itself, the Behnam Maghari Centre. Her mother works as a cleaner, her father is illiterate and unemployed, and

her mother is also illiterate. They lived with ten other unrelated children in one house.

They have also reported the following:

The third case they mentioned is about Omid, a 7-year-old Afghan child whose illiterate parents have six children in their home. Omid is their third child. The story goes that when Omid was five years old, his older brother, who was around 14 or 15 years old, sexually abused him, involving anal penetration, when Omid was five years old.

This narrative illustrates how poverty and a lack of family support can contribute to the vulnerability of children to abuse. The socioeconomic circumstances, combined with limited access to education and resources, create a challenging environment for raising children and addressing their needs. In such situations, the risk of abuse can be heightened, and external support systems become crucial in providing protection and intervention.

The founder and director of Iranian AIDS Association has stated:

A child who grew up in a densely populated family and slept in an 8-person room together has learned, starting from the age of three or four, to engage in sexual activities with their older sibling. This behaviour continued, leading to a bond with their sibling, and the child can only imagine this kind of relationship in their mind, nothing beyond a sexual connection.

A 37-year-old woman says:

I don't know, maybe that's why I ended up being bisexual, and now I sleep with both men and women. I have discussed this with my sister several times, and it seems she is not particularly bothered by the issue or doesn't want to admit it. Whatever it was, I know that

both my sister and I engaged in these activities with boys and girls later on.

The above examples demonstrate that sexual abuse by close relatives can create and intensify same-sex tendencies in survivors during later stages of their lives, particularly in the post-adolescent period. The assumption that same-sex tendencies are purely inherent or biological will be called into question through this study. The statements above indicate that these tendencies may have a social origin; they are a social construct. In the process of individuals' social integration, especially during childhood and adolescence when the mind is shaped through social learning and the needs and emotions are socially constructed, these inclinations and tendencies can arise and persist in individuals. Moreover, in later stages of life, they can shape the type and style of the individual's relationships and personal and social life.

Mrs. M. has been subjected to prolonged abuse by her uncle in her childhood. She mentioned the number of family members as follows:

There are four sisters in our family, and I am the second eldest. Following us, my parents had another child, a son, making us a total of five children.

Mrs. Mim's account clearly demonstrates that their family size was relatively large, and within their family, the value and importance of boys were higher than girls. In these families where the value of boys exceeds that of girls, girls born before the birth of a son are criticized, their needs are not met, they are not well taken care of, and they always face a hostile environment. Mrs. M narrated the limitations and abuses she experienced from her family as follows:

Financially, we were okay, but not as much as my mother provided for the needy and always said not to buy too much and not to dress too well so that the poor wouldn't get upset. It was always a regret for me that we had more money than others, but we dressed more modestly compared to others, and this caused many

complexes in me. It was like this for all four of us. It was my mother's way of upbringing.

She has a significant age difference with her father. She is currently 24 years old, and there is about a 60-year age difference between her and her father. This age difference has been a reason for the lack of understanding and support from him. In other words, it signifies a kind of incompetence in parenting:

Considering the age difference with my father, who is 85 years old now, and me being around 24 years old, I didn't receive much support from him to help me grow or value me.

Mrs. Nima, who has lost her mother, has been subjected to such abuse:

I want to tell you another case that was even more painful for me, named Niloufar. Niloufar experienced sexual abuse at a young age by her father. She had a strong antisocial attitude and didn't have patience for anyone. She had hatred towards everyone, even though I showed her a lot of kindness. Once, when I was in charge of their section, I organized a birthday party and got her a gift. The next day when I greeted her, she turned her face away and went to the other side. She never wanted to have an emotional connection with anyone, she didn't even smile. When you looked into her eyes, she would turn her face away and avoid people. This case of sexual abuse was real and done by her father. I don't know where her mother was, but she didn't have a mother. I don't know if there was a divorce or if her mother passed away.

The experience of sexual abuse in the above example indicates that sexual abuse by a father, which plays an important role in the development of any individual regardless of gender, leads

to the loss of trust and a sense of security; social assets such as trust and security in the social environment of this person have become scarce and ineffective.

Sexual abuse in these families is not limited to girls only; boys also experience abuse. The family structure can have underlying characteristics and conducive conditions that lead to sexual exploitation and abuse by relatives, regardless of gender. However, the unequal frequency of reporting sexual abuse by both genders and the higher prevalence of women reporting experiences based on abuse indicate differences and biases in upbringing, social acceptance, and gender stereotypes. Among the interviewees, men were less inclined to talk about their experiences of abuse, and often they would mention their experiences through the language of another person, as if such an experience in the past was a source of shame for a man. Women felt more comfortable expressing their experiences, especially when they realized that sharing their experiences could help in research that benefits future generations. Ali, the headmaster of a boys' school, said:

This boy had a stepmother, and later he was subjected to sexual abuse by his stepmother. I was at the Reform And Education Centre at the time. When he was 8 or 9 years old, his father divorced his mother. His father remarried, and when the new wife came to their house, she showed affection to the child to win his heart.

Family practices, which refer to how families raise their children, play a significant role in sexual abuse. In this regard, ineffective parenting practices within families can be discussed. In the previous discussion, some dimensions of weak or ineffective parenting were mentioned. The most important components of ineffective parenting practices identified in this research include the lack or shortage of affection and love within the family environment, familial exploitation of children, neglect of childcare, negligence in meeting their needs, absence of verbal boundaries among family members, lack of suitable guardianship, addiction of the

father and maternal mental disorders, and the presence of a substitute mother (primary caregiver).

Other factors include severe family limitations, lack of control in the child's living environment, leaving the child in the care of others, lack of effective protection, failure to report abuse, imposing economic restrictions on children, criticism and blaming by the family, experiencing dominance by a controlling grandmother, incorrect beliefs held by the mother, lack of parenting skills, and lack of education from the family. The absence or lack of love within the family environment can lead children to seek it from other individuals. It can even be said that abusers can better capture the attention of these children through techniques such as deception, showing affection, and the like.

Impoverished and dysfunctional families are more likely to neglect their children and expose them to abuse. There is a relationship between poverty and social control and supervision within the family. Economic deprivation is accompanied by cultural and social deprivation, which in the context of sexual abuse is manifested as cultural deprivation in impoverished families in the form of lack of education and social deprivation in the form of social unawareness and lack of social control and supervision.

Mrs. B, the mentor, has reported:

Well, a mother who grew up in a dysfunctional family and eventually was sold off for marriage, it means there was a transaction and money was taken from the groom's family. This girl, who is now pregnant and is having a baby, but her child, according to what they see in that neighbourhood, in a place called Behboudi, the child is very vulnerable and exposed in the streets, and everyone harms that child.

Permissive or neglectful families lack clear verbal boundaries, leading to instances of open cursing and the attribution of negative traits among family members. This language underscores the presence of inappropriate parenting practices

within these family dynamics, which have consequences for the upbringing of children. In fact, the socialization and integration of children into the family serve as the primary institution for socialization through communication and language.

Language not only provides vocabulary but also shapes the child's mind and creates a picture of social life and relationships for them. Due to social unawareness, families lack supervision, focus, and sensitivity to their own verbal and linguistic literature in family interactions and communications, especially with children and adolescents. Unconsciously, this leads to ineffective approaches to child rearing and creates grounds for issues such as sexual abuse, both through inadequate punishment and reward systems. Mrs. J said:

I remember she used to get beaten so much by her family, and she had some mental disorders. She had even self-harmed and once broke her hand with a glass in the children's home. You know... everyone knows her. I remember for a while, she slept in the mosque for about four or five months. There was a mosque near Shush Square, and in the morning, she would come to the Shush Children's Home. Yes, she had been expelled, and she herself was a sinful person. I always said that unfortunately, parents, due to their lack of awareness in childrearing, don't know how to deal with them. Their approach is punishment and beatings. In school, they scold and compare her to other students. They have no other way because they don't know and are unaware.

Mrs. B said:

This issue existed within a family without any reservation regarding the literature and colloquial language they used among themselves, which bordered on sexual jokes.

Mrs. M, who had been harassed by her uncle, talked about her parents' parenting style:

During our initial conversation, I emphasized that I regard my parents' illiteracy and lack of knowledge about child-rearing as the primary factor. Despite the mother's upbringing in the affluent district of Shemroon and the father's favorable circumstances in the same economic level at Shariati, they possessed no knowledge whatsoever about raising a child.

These parents were primarily focused on their own needs, often neglecting their children. In many instances, the head of the family engaged in inappropriate sexual behaviour within the family setting, which the child witnessed. The account of Shida being assaulted is also an example of parents lacking parenting skills and being unable to properly care for them. Shida's family was an ordinary family, with a normal father and mother and a brother. Her father had an addiction, but one of the main reasons for her harassment by her cousin was due to the family's negligence in taking care of her and their lax parenting style:

I believe that any girl in my situation could have been subjected to harassment. In my opinion, the main reason was the negligence of the family. They shouldn't have sent me to be with the boys and the sheep at that age. Even my mother sometimes had doubts and would say, 'Don't go out with strange boys,' but I don't know why they sent me with him. Or, for example, my father and brother treated me like a little boy. They taught me to ride a motorcycle at a young age, gave me a tractor to drive around. In general, I did a lot of manly things. My father had an addiction, he used drugs, and he didn't pay much attention to me and my brother.

Similarly, Leila, who had been subjected to harassment by various individuals such as her uncle, cousin, and strangers, has talked about her family. She said:

Yeah, unfortunately, my father had and still has an addiction. I think that had a significant impact. If a father pays attention to his daughter, she won't be susceptible to many things. My father didn't prioritize us. So, what about care and attention? My mother used to pay a lot of attention to us. She made a lot of efforts for our lives. Even now, she tries, but my mother had her own specific beliefs. Even now, she believes that divorce shouldn't be sought, that one should endure and rebuild. She has these beliefs like going in with a white dress and coming back with a white dress. She has old-fashioned thinking. Or, for example, there was a butcher's shop across from our house. She would ask me to give her my hand so that she could hold it. Why would I need her to hold my hand? I was a child at that time, and all the household shopping was done with me. But, well, I didn't understand many things, and my mother didn't talk to me about many issues.

Leila's account vividly demonstrates that due to her father's addiction, her mother's lack of awareness, and misguided beliefs, she not only did not receive proper love and attention from them but also did not receive appropriate education on self-care and dealing with the demands of strangers. Even when her family becomes aware that Leila has been subjected to abuse, they respond in a highly inappropriate manner by physically beating her and forcing her to marry her abuser:

What happened? Did the sexual abuse stop and come to an end? In a way, I thought, at worst, I would get beaten by my father and mother. I would endure it, but I didn't do that; I mean, I came to this conclusion. I did get beaten. Oh, so you went and told your mother. No, I didn't tell her; she went and told her. The boy told my mother, and as a result of my father's intervention, I received an extremely severe beating. Extremely severe. To the point that my whole body was bruised. I

was a mess. And suddenly, unfortunately, my cousin, who is now my husband, started abusing me. My father saw it, and they took us to the legal doctor for examination.

Emotional voids, ineffective care and supervision systems, inappropriate reward and punishment systems, as well as individuals lacking necessary life skills or performing poorly in them, are important factors contributing to the sexual abuse of children and adolescents. Individuals living in such families lack self-care skills and often lack essential life skills or perform poorly in them. As mentioned earlier, Leila's family not only failed to show her love and attention, but they also lacked proper awareness for her care and education. Even after experiencing abuse, they did not provide appropriate support, but instead physically beat her and forced her into a marriage with her abuser. If children do not receive attention and love from their family environment, they may seek it outside the family. In such circumstances, perpetrators take advantage of the situation and harm children.

Psychotherapist Morris Setudegan has described the experience of one of his clients as follows:

I was so in love with my teacher because my father was a doctor, and my mother was a teacher. They never had time for me, and I longed for someone to pay attention to me. He used to say, 'Let's go to the garden,' and it meant the world to me. Until the moment he sexually abused me. It was a lack of affection and love.

Parental addiction creates an environment conducive to child abuse in various ways. When one or both parents are addicted, their ability to provide attention and affection to their children diminishes, as their focus is primarily directed towards obtaining and consuming substances. Addiction disrupts family dynamics by causing role shifting or even the elimination of roles, as well as the breakdown of the division of labour and emotional equilibrium within the family. Consequently, the family can become a hub of conflict and

violence. It is important to note that issues related to family structure and functions have historically been intertwined with addiction from the outset.

Emotional imbalance, in the form of excessive support or neglect of the psychological and emotional needs of family members through imbalanced parenting styles, a centralized power structure, or a form of abandonment in family management, as well as the emergence of personalities such as the rescuer, the victim, the dominator, the passive, etc., are constantly contributing factors to addiction within families.

Addiction also plays a significant role in depleting family resources and causing poverty in several ways. Firstly, individuals with addiction spend a portion of their financial resources on acquiring drugs. Secondly, drug abuse disrupts their daily functioning, making it difficult for them to fulfil their job responsibilities effectively. Thirdly, there is a high probability of them being fired from their jobs as employers are generally less inclined to employ individuals with addiction. All of these factors lead to the impoverishment of addicted families to the extent that they may exploit their children to obtain drugs.

A community organization manager in the Darvazeh Ghar neighbourhood stated:

The next case is a 13-year-old girl from the Darvazeh Ghar neighbourhood. They are Iranians, and our girl is an only child. At the age of 13, she was sold by her father and practically forced into marriage. Now she has become a mother at around 15 or 16 years old, and her child is two years old. The girl's mother is in prison, and her father was a drug dealer.

Mr. Omid, who works at the Shush Children's Home, speaks about a lifestyle among some families that leads to child sexual abuse.

These families expose their children to exploitation. They raise them for the purpose of not only begging but also engaging in criminal activities. You can see that

they lack a mental framework and their ability to learn is severely compromised. I have seen twenty-year-olds who have had a difficult time receiving education and growing up, thinking that their way of life is normal. They have learned that if you tell them something repeatedly for a decade, they think it is good. We had a child, and she is still with us. She studied and I was his teacher in some subjects. She had intellectual deficiencies, and her family would bring her food, thinking that it was a reward for engaging in sexual activities. I apologize for the analogy, but it was like giving a treat to a dog every time it performed a certain action. This child had become conditioned and had a child with his brother. Social workers intervened and took the children away from them, providing them with separate lives. They are being taught and guided. Their lifestyle has completely changed.

As evident from the above statements, the shaping of individuals' minds and their perception, or better put, the construction of their minds, is influenced by their lifestyle within the family and society, which is impacted by various tangible aspects of life, including economic, political, social, and cultural conditions. These tangible conditions form the mental and psychological dimensions of individuals as social agents, giving shape and direction to their actions. And so in the interaction between the tangible and the mental, the reality of life, including social reality, takes shape.

In the interaction between the tangible and the mental, a social reality is created that provides a foundation for sexual abuse and is reconstructed and represented in the space of interrelated actions that occur in the daily lives of these minds. It seems as if it has always existed, an inherent and natural occurrence, without being perceived as a social issue that requires social understanding and sociological analysis. The social and economic factors that contribute to this phenomenon of sexual abuse are often overlooked. This

lifestyle is essentially the product of the structural and social exclusion mechanisms imposed on marginalized groups, namely those deprived of education and economic opportunities.

In summary, undesirable structural characteristics and ineffective family practices, such as inappropriate parenting styles and the use of violence, can create a conducive environment for the abuse of its members. One important function of the family as the primary social institution is to establish an individual's social bond with the community, and when it malfunctions, it leads to social exclusion and paves the way for issues such as sexual abuse. A significant part of individuals' lived experiences is shaped within the family, where their emotions and perceptions are constructed. A family that lacks awareness of issues related to childhood and adolescence can exacerbate such problems and the associated harms.

Sometimes this institution can become a source of abuse without any connection to other institutions, as in the case of Mrs. Mamarzi mentioned above. They resided in one of the northern areas of Tehran and were economically well-off. Even structurally, this family did not have significant issues; rather, their parenting methods were ineffective. On the other hand, we also encounter families that not only have undesirable structural characteristics and practices but also experience extreme poverty, which is a product of these structural characteristics. The causal pathways leading to abuse can vary among different families.

The role of the father can symbolically represent a pole of power and a special supportive role for children. When a child believes and perceives their father as strong and healthy, available to them, someone who defends them and doesn't allow anyone to harm them, they develop higher self-confidence and take better care of themselves, relying on this immense power. In this context, we discuss the narrative of Samaneh, who perceived the power pole in her childhood as weak due to her father's disability and status as a war veteran. She never managed to seek help and support from him. The father represents power and responsibility. When, due to

structural and functional issues within the family institution, the father's role is eliminated or roles are shifted, the child faces challenges in terms of support, upbringing, learning, and social integration, which are all necessary for the individual's preparation for social roles in adulthood. Samaneh, 35 years old, shared her childhood experience as follows:

My father was in the military and a war veteran. He became disabled and almost lost his job. His education level is a bachelor's degree. From the age of five to fourteen, I was abused. Which one do you want me to talk about? My uncle abused me from the age of seven to fourteen, and the first time it happened, it was by another unknown person.

It is evident from Samaneh's account that she faced a traumatic experience of abuse during her childhood, and her perception of her father as a weak and unavailable figure may have played a role in her inability to seek support and protection from him. This highlights the significance of the father's role as a symbol of strength and support for children, and the consequences that can arise when this role is compromised or absent within the family structure.

Furthermore, war, as a social phenomenon that brings about cultural transformations, has both short-term and long-term effects on various aspects of the personal, social, emotional, and familial lives of war survivors and veterans. Due to their unique circumstances, veterans may experience emotional disturbances such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being exposed to trauma. These emotional disturbances can have an impact on the well-being and psychological health of their family members. Although these effects may manifest directly or indirectly in their interactions with spouses and children, a study conducted by Rey and colleagues concluded that anger, withdrawal, or emotional neglect are the most prevalent negative emotions expressed by veterans in their relationships with their spouses and children. In many cases, children, especially in relation to

their fathers, experience feelings of indifference and emotional coldness (Ray et al., 2009).

The burden of psychological and tangible care for a veteran, which varies depending on the type and degree of their disability, is on one hand, while the psychological and emotional needs of children, which, due to the prioritization of the veteran's illness and problems, are considered secondary, are on the other hand.

In the Iran-Iraq war, one important issue that received less attention is the long-term psychological and emotional effects and life experiences of daughters with veteran fathers. These girls, now in their 30s and 40s, have been living for over three decades since the war and have numerous psychological and emotional needs similar to their peers at these ages. However, their perspective and life experiences with veteran fathers have exposed them to different experiences. A deep and comprehensive examination of these experiences can contribute to a better understanding of their needs, perceptions, and ultimately assist them in making important life decisions, as well as supporting their psychological and social well-being (Khodabakhshi & Najmi Sadegh, 2019).

Ms. Ismaili, a painting teacher and mentor in some non-governmental organizations, has stated:

There was a 10-year-old boy who was very attractive and handsome. He had a good relationship with his classmates and also his teacher, Ms. Esmaeili. After a while, they noticed that he was frequently absent. It turns out that this child came from a family that had gone through a divorce, and his father was addicted. After some investigation, they realized that the father had been abusing the child in various ways.

Mr. Badakhashan said:

One case that comes to mind is a young lady who was 23 years old. It had been around four years since her parents divorced, and what she remembers is that

before the divorce, her father behaved in a way that she didn't feel safe with him; she didn't have a sense of comfort from his affection. After the divorce, when her mother obtained custody, she had to leave her child alone at home or seek help from others to take care of her. The mother herself is not aware of this, but the maternal uncle, who is now 67 to 69 years old, is still present. At that time, from the age of 56, he repeatedly sexually abused her.

Ms. Nouri, a teacher, reported:

The story is based on the fact that they are a Turk family. They had a large family, and there was a lot of coming and going. In our time, there weren't just two children. The parents would leave the children with themselves, their siblings, and their cousins, and they would play in the yard. This happened when she was around 6 or 7 years old, either in kindergarten or before she started school. Yes, she was young, fair-skinned, with big eyes, and very beautiful. She never wanted to tell this story, but a long series of events happened that eventually made her share it. This poor girl had an unmarried uncle who was an addict. He was sleeping in a room, and suddenly she saw someone caressing her until she wanted to say, 'What happened, Uncle?' and he covered her mouth. He covered her mouth and committed sexual abuse and satisfied himself.

Ms. M said:

For example, I had a case of a 5-year-old girl from a single-parent family. She had a problem with the muscles on the right side of her body. Then her mother remarried a 20-year-old addict. Later, I noticed that the girl stopped attending preschool. I followed up and

asked why, but her mother told me to leave them alone and that her daughter was happy with them. One day, the girl's grandmother came to us and said that the girl was being mistreated and taken advantage of in that house. They are giving her directives and engaging in physical contact. Another case I had was a 22-year-old girl who came to me and said that five years ago, she was sexually assaulted by her stepfather and his son. It wasn't just sexual abuse; she wanted to scream and shout, but her mother would wake up, and they closed.

The school counsellor said:

There is another 18-year-old girl who is preparing for the college entrance exam this year. She comes from a very religious family, and they hired a private tutor for her in the early stages. This tutor was a distant relative. He would come and teach her, and sometimes he would stay longer because it took a while to cover the material.

Ms. B said:

[...] Apparently, her parents went to work every day, and when she was 13 or 14 years old, one of the neighbour boys would forcefully assault her in her room. The elderly neighbour noticed and came to her rescue.

Ms. Iranshahi, a social worker at the Nasser Khosrow Children's Home, said:

The mother had separated from the father, and as a result, the girl was residing with her father. The father had a close friend whom he held in high regard, and they had regular interactions. This friend successfully gained the girl's trust and unfortunately subjected her to three or four instances of sexual abuse.

Ms. Mandani said:

Another issue is that most of the abuse cases are perpetrated by women who are sexually abused by their relatives. Men and boys, on the other hand, have more freedom to engage in sexual exploitation with strangers.

The aforementioned statements shed light on the fact that the form and magnitude of sexual abuse are influenced by another factor, namely the gender of individuals. It is evident that there is a higher prevalence of sexual abuse by relatives towards women compared to men, and this issue stems from gender-based discrimination. The objective conditions of life and the distinct lifestyles experienced by both genders have consistently played a role in this disparity.

Women, due to their sex and the societal limitations placed on their social interactions, have been more susceptible to sexual abuse perpetrated by family members. The restricted social connections and power dynamics often present within familial relationships contribute to their vulnerability. On the other hand, men, benefiting from the relative freedom in social interactions that their sex affords them, have been more prone to experiencing sexual abuse from individuals who are further removed from their immediate circle, such as acquaintances or strangers.

It is important to recognize that these patterns should not be generalized to all cases, as sexual abuse can occur across genders and in various contexts. However, the observations presented highlight the complex interplay between gender, social dynamics, and the prevalence of sexual abuse. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive efforts to challenge gender inequalities, promote awareness, provide support systems, and foster environments that prioritize the safety and well-being of all individuals, irrespective of their gender.

The responsible person at the Women's Support Institute Office:

Boys, when outside the house and in the hands of non-relatives, can be subjected to sexual abuse. However, girls, on the other hand, mostly experience abuse within their own homes and by relatives.

In the same context, a religious preacher and counsellor mentioned:

In the second case, it was all like that. It started with playing, but that girl, let's call her Sara [...], she has been going to her father's place since she was 13. From the age of 13? No, no, her parents had problems, and her mother would get angry and the girl, since childhood, had an attachment to her father and would sleep at her father's place. The mother questioned why her daughter would sleep at her father's place when she was 18. The mother would dress up and wear nice clothes, but the father wouldn't pay attention to her, but he valued the daughter a lot. The father? Yes, one day she stood up and realized that when he came home from work, he would go to his daughter who was wearing perfume and makeup, and yes, they were having a sexual relationship. They had a full relationship.

When both parents live together, in addition to fulfilling each other's sexual needs, both or at least one of them has a strong protective influence, and their presence ensures the care of the child. However, when parents separate and the child lives with only one of them, this influence may disappear, and if other factors exist, it creates a fertile ground for the sexual abuse of the child. This has been repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees. These types of single-parent families exist in modern lifestyles in all societies, including Iranian society, due to global conditions and global diversity of these types of families. However, social institutions complement and support these types of families more effectively and prominently in developed societies, due to their social welfare and social

policies, compared to a society like Iran, which faces developmental issues and challenges arising from economic imbalances and the style of its political economy. In today's Iranian society, single-parent families, without any support from welfare and support institutions, as well as in the absence of supportive social policies, face increasing problems and challenges. One of the most important challenges is sexual abuse by relatives or by the single parent to the child, or in another case, by close relatives who, due to the single parent's distractions, have less control and supervision over the child. The clinic director and therapist report a case of incest that lasted about 16 years:

What's the next case that comes to your mind? That one was really horrifying. It was the father. When the child was 4 years old, they separated. The mother went to one of those foreign countries, and the father stayed with the 4-year-old child. The father was with this child from the age of 4 until the woman returned when she was 20 years old, meaning the father was with her until she was 20.

Mrs. Architect (a graduate in architecture) who has witnessed her parents' sexual relationships multiple times and even her father's extramarital relationships with other women, has spoken about the consequences of abuse:

I became so hardened and realized that I didn't give in to these people, but I became friends with many boys and had numerous sexual relationships. I would quickly cut off the relationship. I only wanted to have sexual relationships with boys to see how sex feels, that's all. I harmed myself through this. I inflicted a lot of damage on myself. Maybe I felt temporary satisfaction, but my soul wasn't fulfilled. I would ask myself, 'Why are you doing this to yourself? Why are you getting involved with different people and investing time and money?' I just wanted to know what

sex meant and where that pleasure they talk about is. I had seen my parents, and I wanted to replicate what they did. I had numerous friendships with different boys and experienced various harms. I would cut, cry, and enter a state of silence where you're left alone with yourself. You do these things, but in the end, you're lonely.

The above statements refer to the harm that individuals experience through witnessing their parents' sexual relationships during childhood. Since a child lacks understanding and education about sexual relationships, when they repeatedly witness their parents' sexual encounters, an image forms in their mind or is constructed in a way that revolves more around experiencing or even disgust toward these relationships. In both cases, it will have detrimental effects and consequences for these individuals. One of these consequences is the addiction to sexual relationships or sex itself, which can be seen as a form of granting permission to engage in multiple sexual relationships within the context of sexual abuse.

The relationship of this woman architect was not based on inner satisfaction because she not only lacked any love and attention from her family but also witnessed sexual relationships and even abuse by them on multiple occasions.

These experiences have had a profound impact on her psychological well-being and perception of intimate relationships. The absence of parental support, care, and healthy role models has left her emotionally scarred and seeking validation and understanding through sexual encounters. She sought to replicate the behaviours she observed from her parents, hoping to understand the meaning of sex and the pleasure associated with it. However, these attempts only resulted in temporary satisfaction while leaving her soul unfulfilled.

Furthermore, her involvement with different partners and the emotional and physical harm she inflicted upon herself highlight the deep-seated issues and struggles she faced. The

self-destructive patterns she engaged in, such as self-cutting and emotional withdrawal, reflect her internal turmoil and the desperate search for connection and fulfilment.

It is essential to acknowledge the long-lasting impact that early exposure to inappropriate sexual behaviour can have on individuals. The lack of guidance, communication, and healthy boundaries within the family unit can lead to confusion, distorted perceptions, and harmful coping mechanisms. Supporting individuals who have experienced such trauma is crucial, providing them with therapy, education, and a safe environment to heal and develop healthy relationships.

Inefficiency of institutional support for sex education and protection of victims

Unlike traditional societies where people lived in small communities and were less exposed to individual and social problems, today we live in a society where we face numerous individual and social issues. On an individual level, in order to effectively confront these issues, we need skills, including personal, interpersonal, and social skills. Learning sexual skills through sex education during childhood is one of these skills. Since children are often unable to defend themselves, it is necessary to both protect and educate them so that they know what to do or how to take care of themselves when they are threatened. Of course, these teachings should not only be directed towards children but the entire community, especially parents, should also benefit from them, as parents also often need this education.

Sex education encompasses cognitive, emotional, social, interactive, and physical aspects of sexual matters. Sex education does not encourage children and adolescents to engage in sexual relationships. In sex education standards, experts have agreed that 'sex education begins in early childhood and continues through adolescence and adulthood. For children and young people, the goal is to support and protect their sexual development. This gradually equips children and adolescents with positive information, skills, and values so that they can understand sexual matters, enjoy them in later stages of life, have safe and fulfilling relationships, and

take responsibility for their own and others' sexual health. Sex education lays the foundation for a safe and satisfying transition to adulthood by encouraging emotional understanding, reproductive education, exploring family and interpersonal relationships, learning about safety, building self-confidence, and developing communication skills' (World Health Organization, 2012: 1).

It is necessary for education to start from preschool or even before school age for children, and parents should be educated and informed about this issue from birth. The stages of education can begin with teaching about body parts and their names, as well as body care, such as familiarizing children with appropriate forms of physical contact like kissing and hugging, and informing them about who is allowed to touch their bodies and how they should report it to their parents and trusted networks if that person is not authorized.

The most important aspect of learning is the skill of saying 'no' in this area. Children should learn to say 'no' if someone requests any kind of relationship or engages in any action and report it. The first step in sex education should be taken within the family environment, meaning that parents should be educated on how to deal with children's issues and questions and provide appropriate answers. It is also necessary to design an educational system that systematically familiarizes children with sexual health and interpersonal relationships based on their developmental stage.

Furthermore, the content of this education should be developed by a group of experts in this field, such as psychologists, doctors, social workers, sociologists, teachers, and religious scholars. Their collaboration is essential to ensure the production of suitable content and its acceptance by society. It is important to justify to society the importance and necessity of this education so that they do not reject it.

Sex education is more than just self-protection against risks; it encompasses teaching safe and healthy sexual relationships while enhancing skills. In various societies, different organizations can take on the responsibility of sex education, with educational institutions leading the way. Unfortunately,

despite the immense importance of these teachings, sex education is prohibited and inaccessible in Iran. This absence of awareness and enlightenment has led to several problems, one of which is child sexual abuse.

Numerous factors, or rather, multiple barriers, have contributed to the lack of timely sex education for children, adolescents, and families in Iranian society. These factors can be categorised as follows:

- 1 Lack of Expertise: A lack of specialized knowledge and expertise in the field of sex education hinders its development and implementation.
- 2 Religious Taboos: The deeply ingrained religious nature of Iranian society has made discussions about sexuality a taboo subject, further complicating sex education efforts.
- 3 Denial Mechanisms and Lack of Transparency: The prevailing culture of denial and a lack of transparency across all layers of society obstruct open dialogue about sex education.
- 4 Institutional Inaction: The absence of institutional collaboration regarding sex education exacerbates the problem.
- 5 Diverging Opinions: Conflicting views between proponents and opponents of sex education, particularly in terms of awareness campaigns, have hindered progress.

Developing a comprehensive sex education program for children, adolescents, and families requires input and cooperation from various sectors of society. These sectors include families, schools, media, religious institutions, government bodies, and others involved in policymaking, budget allocation, and legitimizing such education.

However, in Iranian society, the complex network of overlapping responsibilities, conflicts of interest, and negative attitudes towards certain sectors, such as social sciences and their experts, frequently hinders the development of sex education programs. The dominance of religious discourse in cultural and social policy-making, particularly within the

family institution, contributes to the avoidance of addressing these issues, resulting in a highly stigmatized and taboo nature surrounding discussions about sexuality. These conversations are often deemed illegitimate, especially when approached from a religious perspective, which significantly restricts open dialogue. This culture of denial not only discourages discussion but also fosters a societal construct that portrays sexual desires and needs as unnatural or undesirable.

Sex education, as a result, becomes a challenge that is set apart from other educational endeavours. The existing lack of collaboration and mutual understanding among institutions due to overlapping responsibilities and conflicting viewpoints has pushed sex education to the margins of societal concerns. Additionally, the sharp divide between proponents and opponents of sex education further complicates matters, with each side providing its own rationale.

Proponents view sex education as a necessary life skill, while opponents perceive it as a potential stimulus for undesirable behaviour. These diverging views have created a substantial obstacle to the implementation of sex education programs in Iran.

Various factors have contributed to the reluctance to plan and implement sex education in Iran. It is crucial for Iranian society to address these challenges and work towards developing a comprehensive and inclusive sex education program that prioritizes the well-being and safety of its citizens. This would require overcoming taboos, fostering dialogue, and seeking common ground among all stakeholders involved. Only through concerted efforts can sex education become an integral part of Iranian society, promoting healthier and safer relationships while preventing child sexual abuse.

A 32-year-old shopkeeper said:

I had sexual contact with a teenage girl who had rebellious behaviour several times, behind the shop, because there was nowhere else. I wish we both had the knowledge and received proper guidance from parents and sex education at that time. Unfortunately, in this

country, society denies and prevents people from receiving necessary sex education, even though it's an essential topic.

The school principal said:

You see, there is absolutely no sex education provided. Even I, as the head of the school, have not received sufficient training in this area to educate the teachers, let alone the students. Even if there were optional courses offered, the teachers feel ashamed of each other, both male and female. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in this situation. If we were to consider the students, if there were any classes, the level of education provided could be around 5%, 10%, or 15% at best some basic education is given, more or less. If the necessary education were provided, starting from the elementary level, because, in my opinion, child abuse is more prevalent in that age group, it would be better. Now, forget about the lower levels; they haven't even arrived. If the required education were given, if we knew who the perpetrators are and how to provide education, consider that we are now in rural schools. If there is any telephone communication between boys and girls, due to the small community, it is possible that the student may be forced to drop out of school to protect their honour.

The above quote provides a clear indication that there is a lack of comprehensive sex education in our society, and this absence of education and awareness has become problematic. Even a simple telephone conversation between a boy and a girl can lead to the girl dropping out of school because, in small communities such as villages, if such a connection becomes apparent, it results in dishonour and imposes restrictions that lead to discontinuation of education.

The more important point highlighted in the narrative is that discussing sexual matters is still considered taboo for education specialists. This demonstrates that there is a long way to go before these issues become normalized in society or in certain communities, and before children and other members of society receive sex education. The statements above indicate that one of the significant obstacles to sex education in Iranian society is prevailing social emotions rooted in the style of societal acceptance and the process of social upbringing.

Emotions such as shame, guilt, fear, and others are dominant feelings that arise and become internalized in individuals during their upbringing, particularly during childhood and adolescence. These emotions serve as major barriers to discussing sexual matters, even among professionals and teachers who also experience these sentiments, hindering awareness and education. Additionally, the mechanism of honour and social modesty is so deeply ingrained in our social and cultural layers that topics open to discussion, which necessitate collective dialogue, are denied and become obstacles to transparency. When discussing and enlightening sexual matters is associated with shame and must be prohibited, it is consistently regarded as taboo and denied.

The director of the Mehr va Mah Centre also reported:

In the cases I have encountered so far, I can say that 99% of them happened due to a lack of awareness and the denial of sexual issues. Our families still refuse to accept that such incidents have occurred to their children. The children were not educated. I remember when I was teaching first grade, I told the kids that if someone tries to touch them inappropriately, they should speak up. Then I witnessed one of them saying, 'But ma'am, this person does that to me, touches my private parts and tickles me there.' I was shocked to see how unaware this child was, and even their family never mentioned that no one should touch their private parts.

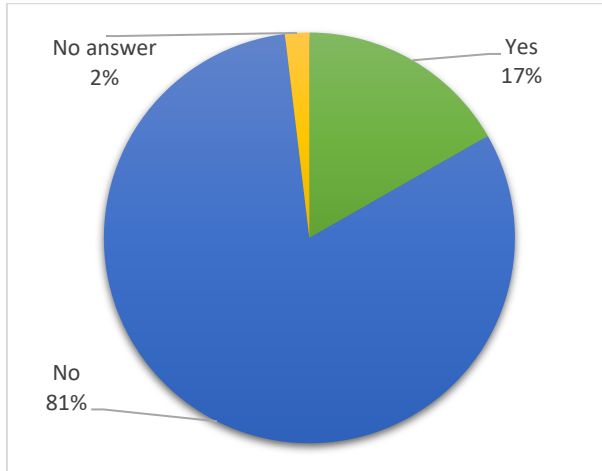


Figure 21 Distribution of respondents based on reports of sexual harassment to government organizations such as Welfare Organization

The above statement reflects the consequences of social unawareness or, to put it more accurately, the low level of social awareness. This has resulted in denial and non-acceptance of sexual issues and matters within Iranian families and society. As we know, the first step towards planning and policymaking for sex education is acknowledging the existence of the issue. However, due to the low level of social awareness and the denial of the issue, progressing to the next stage of implementing practical sex education for families and society has become difficult and seemingly impossible.

The lack of sex education in the educational curriculum in Iran, both for parents, educators, teachers, and the absence of teaching self-care steps to children, has led to unpleasant incidents. These incidents are not hidden from many individuals close to the child, but due to neglect and non-acceptance of such events, the child will remain deprived of any form of support and therapeutic services. Moreover, there may even be cases of unintended pregnancies resulting from unwanted sexual relationships, with negative repercussions on the mother-child relationship and parenting.

The director of the Tolo-e-Bineshanha Children's Home has stated:

Sexual motivation in children and adolescents, which reaches its peak in late adolescence, should be controlled. However, due to the negligence and complacency of parents and those around them, sometimes it leads to sexual abuse of children at a young age. As our society becomes more complex and open, and as extreme boundaries emerge and become more restricted in its cultural discourse, awareness and education in this regard become more crucial. The scope of these issues expands and becomes broader.

In a society like Iran, the institutions responsible for providing such education include the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, municipalities, welfare organizations, media outlets (especially national media), non-governmental organizations, and other relevant entities. These educative efforts should begin from the early childhood stage, as it is during this time that children's sexual curiosities emerge, and they become vulnerable to abuse.

The appropriate age to start this education is from around 3 years old. However, the content and methods of education should vary according to different age groups, but unfortunately, such education is not readily available. Occasionally, we hear about initiatives in certain regions or through media channels, but they lack a cohesive program and only reach a small segment of the population, with unclear educational content. It is necessary to systematically incorporate these educational programs into the formal education system. Both the content and coherence of these programs should be emphasized, while taking into account the needs of all target groups, including families, children, and adolescents, and utilizing interactive approaches tailored to each group's language and methods of communication.

A female psychologist recalled:

I worked in rural areas for six years. When I started, I was a student. In Kamyaran, for example, the Revolutionary Guards would come to the classroom and deliver educational sessions, but they never discussed respecting privacy boundaries. Those topics are considered taboo there. But what kind of education does the Revolutionary Guards provide? They teach you how to raise your child, but they don't tell you what to do if you have problems at home. How to get married and have children, for example.

The reason why these educational programs are not accessible in Iranian society can be attributed to a more in-depth examination of the policies and authorities of the country. One of the major structural reasons is the conservative and ideological nature of the policymaking apparatus. In Iranian society, the religious sphere has a deep influence on policymakers and institutions.

Many officials and policymakers in the country are clerics. The religious perspective, including Islam, holds a negative view towards sexuality because it is considered one of the instincts that can mislead a person. Even in other cases, the position of religion as the foundation of society and law has led to violence, especially against women and children. An example of this is the issue of child marriage. In fact, the religious discourse that emphasizes the taboo nature of sexuality and denies it, along with its dominance over the legal, social, and cultural space, has legitimized the suppression of sexuality and its exclusion from discussion and education.

Based on the amendments to the Civil Law in 1982 and Article 1041, which prohibits child marriage as contrary to Sharia law, and allows marriage before reaching maturity with the condition of considering the child's best interest by the guardian, the need for court permission was eliminated in the new law. The amendment to Article 1041 was proposed to the parliament in 2002 and ultimately, based on the decision of the Expediency Discernment Council in July 2002, the article was modified as follows: "The marriage of a girl before reaching the

age of 13 solar years and a boy before reaching the age of 15 solar years is subject to the permission of the guardian, provided that it is in the best interest of the child, as determined by a competent court.' (Ghodsi, 2016). As mentioned in Chapter 2, any form of sexual relationship in childhood is a form of sexual abuse of children. Therefore, child marriage in Iran, due to its religious and legal basis, has provided a suitable ground for sexual abuse.

As a result, not only is systematic sex education lacking in society, but in many cases, responsible institutions hinder the efforts of individuals who feel a sense of responsibility in this regard. Accessing schools and obtaining permission to provide educational programs, including sex education, is very challenging, and even those who try to make efforts in this field face serious obstacles. Ms. Mimi, a psychologist, said:

For five years, despite being a social worker, I would come in the afternoon and work at the daycare centre. I used the services of a lady from the welfare system for three years who had received training in sexual abuse courses and seminars. I brought her to teach the children at the daycare centre, and then we had a difficult time because we had to confront the welfare system, asking why we were providing this education. I was doing this and beforehand, I would justify it to the parents, saying that I wanted to do this so that your children wouldn't experience sexual and psychological harm. I can say that 70-80% of them agreed with me, and I would hold these classes because I knew how detrimental sexual abuse could be to our children. So, you may ask, could it have such a profound impact that you preferred prevention and started the education? In my opinion, if children don't receive education, it may be negligence on the part of parents who are unaware, and also society. If these children don't receive education and prevention, what will they do with this onslaught of learning later on? They won't know how

to defend themselves. In my opinion, this is the biggest and deepest deficiency in our education system in society - not providing education on such an important matter. But I did this for three years.

The director of the Taloo-e Bineshanha Child Center as said:

... One of the important factors for prevention [of sexual abuse] is education in schools. I have always considered schools responsible, and I still do. School is not just about teaching four words in math, literature, and geography. All aspects of a student's life in school should be examined because they spend half of their day at school.

In fact, the above statements indicate that prevention of sexual abuse through sex education is absent in Iranian society. This neglect of sexual issues can be particular because Iran, as a religious community, has always emphasized a discourse based on the taboo nature of sexuality, which legitimizes the lack of education in sexual prevention. On the other hand, it can be general, meaning that it is not only the field of sexual issues that lacks prevention measures, but prevention in other areas and social issues is usually weak as well. Perhaps the reason for this is that in a society like Iran, where individuals, institutions, and organizations are more concerned with promoting their own work and building their resumes, rather than taking a functional approach to social issues, they do not consider investing time, resources, and energy in prevention as cost-effective or rational. As a result, the field of treatment in relation to social issues is more prominent, and because it is both profitable and attention-grabbing, it receives more attention, even though unfortunately, the field of sexual issues and its treatment has been neglected due to denial and non-recognition of the problem.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are another tool for education in society. In the absence of systematic education in educational institutions in the past few decades, some NGOs have directly and indirectly entered the field of education,

providing education in this area to individuals under their coverage, including families and children. In some cases, during these educational programs, they become aware that a child has been abused because the child trusts them and reports the abuse. More attention has been paid to the identification of child abuse, but the scope and reach of these organizations' education is limited, and they can only educate a small portion of the society.

On the other hand, individuals working in these organizations may also lack sufficient knowledge, and the government and other institutions have drawn numerous red lines for them, creating high sensitivities in this area. This issue is not limited to NGOs; employees of support organizations also face this challenge, meaning that they may lack sufficient knowledge and skills in this field. In other words, it can be concluded that just as obstacles to sex education in Iranian society are multifactorial and multidimensional, the issues and obstacles of NGOs in sex education are also multifactorial.

One of these factors that NGOs struggle with is the lack of familiarity and awareness among people regarding these organizations and their functions, which stems from the low level of civic awareness among the public, leading to their non-membership in these institutions and organizations.

Another factor is the relationship that these organizations have with other governmental and private institutions, which is not based on collaboration but rather is confrontational and unhealthy, preventing them from being effective. However, the lack of sufficient knowledge and skills in the field of sexual issues by the human resources employed in these organizations and other related organizations indicates a lack of meritocracy in these organizations for the employment of qualified human resources, as well as weaknesses in their governance, selection, control, and supervision. All of these factors contribute to the ineffectiveness of these organizations in the mentioned field. The founder and president of the Iranian AIDS Society has stated:

...I have had a lot of experience regarding child labour, child abuse, and sexual relationships, and I have

actively collaborated with the United Nations and the Welfare Organization on these matters. However, those who are actually involved and working in the field have not seen these training sessions or, even if they have seen them, they do not handle the issue properly.

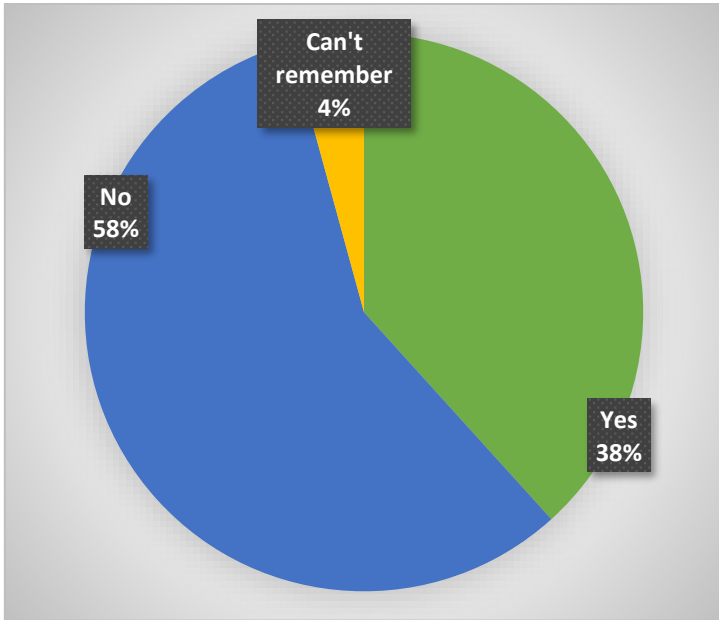


Figure 22 Distribution of respondents based on their experience of classmates bullying

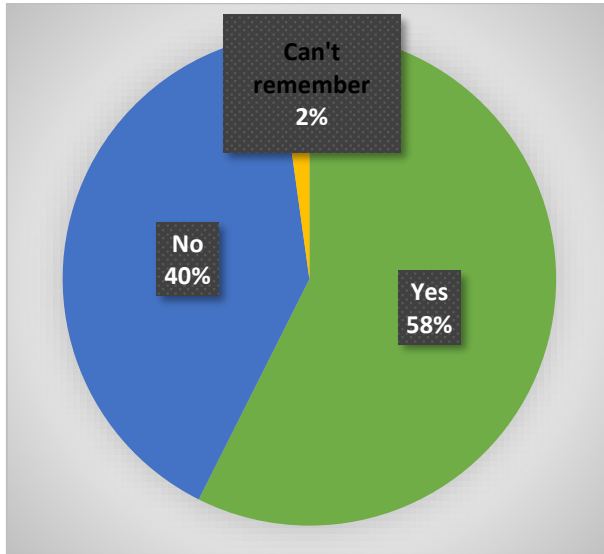


Figure 23 Distribution of respondents according to the experience of playing doctor and patient with children older than themselves

Alongside the issue of education, another important matter is the support for victims. A more thorough examination of this issue requires research to be conducted on support institutions and the subject itself. A portion of this topic has been explored in the study by Maljoo (2010). Legally we still face serious challenges in this field, as the laws, in addition to being contradictory, often deem the victim as the criminal and subject them to punishment. The legal aspect of this discussion has been extensively addressed. The support centre for women's protection has expressed the following concerning this matter:

Unfortunately, it is never possible to prove sexual assault, especially when it is perpetrated by family members, which is completely familiar to us, according to the law. The definition exists in the law that the perpetrator's punishment is execution, but there are so many exceptions and so many loopholes that have been created for it colloquially. Let me give you an example, so you can understand it yourself. We had a sixth-grade girl who was sexually assaulted by her own

father, and she even became pregnant as a result. The DNA test was conducted, and it was positive, proving that this child was the result of the assault. However, during the court session, they said that the similarity in DNA is not sufficient evidence of sexual assault. It is not conclusive evidence of complete penetration, and the father was acquitted, receiving 90 lashes and being deported to the same country he came from.

The founder and president of the Iranian AIDS Association has eloquently expressed a portion of this issue:

In our country, unfortunately, and in places where education is lacking, we do not approach this issue with a preventive mindset. We sit at the end of the line and examine the damage without intervening to prevent these incidents. Sadly, our country lacks strict deterrent laws that would address these issues and treat these victims, those who have been assaulted, as criminals. This causes many of them to remain silent and not express their stories. There are circumstances that we simply do not know, not that we are unaware, but rather we know, and you know too, but it becomes tolerated and accepted as a response to this phenomenon in our country.

When a child falls victim to sexual abuse, it becomes imperative for supportive institutions to provide assistance in various forms. Fortunately, over the past decade, there has been a significant expansion of resources aimed at addressing this issue. Notably, the establishment of social emergency centres in cities with a population of over 50,000 has played a crucial role.

These centres have recognized the importance of intervening in cases of child protection and child abuse. However, despite the commendable efforts in expanding resources, we still face formidable challenges, one of which is the lack of effective

intervention and support during crisis situations. Children from families experiencing crises are in dire need of intervention and support, as the economic and social foundations of their families often fail to adequately address their needs. Unfortunately, government agencies responsible for addressing these issues have struggled to provide the necessary support.

It is vital to acknowledge the unwavering dedication and tireless efforts of the employees and social workers within these organizations, including grassroots initiatives. They go above and beyond their designated duties, striving to make a difference. However, the complex and far-reaching nature of this issue, coupled with numerous constraints and barriers, hampers the effectiveness of their interventions.

We must recognize that there are structural challenges that impede the full potential of dedicated social workers and compassionate human resources as active agents in combating sexual abuse. Among these challenges is the lack of comprehensive, coordinated, and widespread education and awareness. Additionally, supportive institutions do not possess the necessary strength and interactive capacity to address this issue effectively.

It is essential to understand that education alone and mere institutional performance cannot adequately tackle and mitigate the deep-rooted challenges of sexual abuse within Iranian society. Even beyond addressing the structural issues and addressing macro-level factors that contribute to the problem, the implementation of interventions requires careful consideration and thoughtful execution.

To make a meaningful impact in combating sexual abuse, concerted efforts are needed at all levels of society. This entails comprehensive educational programs that raise awareness, foster prevention strategies, and provide support for victims. Furthermore, it necessitates the establishment of robust support networks and the empowerment of institutions that can proactively intervene and provide effective assistance.

By addressing the structural issues and fostering a collaborative approach involving government agencies, social

workers, grassroots organizations, and the wider community, we can work towards creating a society that is better equipped to protect its children from the devastating effects of sexual abuse. Only through such collective efforts can we hope to create a safe and nurturing environment for all children in Iran.

Shima Sattari, a child psychologist and therapist, shared her experience working in District 9 of the Education and Training Department, stating:

I remember vividly that it was in 2015 when several cases of child sexual abuse were referred to my office in the Education and Training Department. When I informed the educational deputy and sought collaboration to support these children, they responded sharply, saying that such matters were not our concern at all. They insisted that the child's family or mother should seek help from their own social priorities, and we had no permission to intervene or provide support. They even stated that you, as a psychologist in this centre, are not allowed to report to the authorities, including the helpline number 123.'

The statements above shed light on the detrimental impact of denial within the education system, alongside the family and media institutions, when it comes to addressing the issue of child sexual abuse. This denial leads to the suppression of the problem, lack of follow-up, evasion of responsibility, and apathy from responsible organizations and individuals.

One of the critical consequences of the absence of comprehensive sex education for children and society as a whole is the facilitation of child abuse. Without a thorough understanding and awareness of sexual abuse, its various forms, and its long-term effects, a significant portion of society remains ill-equipped to recognize and address this issue. Furthermore, children are not adequately equipped with the necessary skills to protect themselves, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and unable to seek help or care for themselves.

The lack of sex education also extends to families, who often remain unaware of the importance of addressing this topic with their children. Due to the taboo nature of the subject or a lack of knowledge, parents may avoid discussing sexual abuse and fail to provide their children with the necessary guidance and support. They may leave their children's questions unanswered or provide inaccurate information, further perpetuating the cycle of ignorance and vulnerability.

Moreover, the absence of dedicated counsellors and advisors in schools, or at least across all educational institutions, exacerbates the problem. These professionals play a crucial role in identifying and supporting children who have experienced harm within their families. However, their limited presence and availability hinder their ability to effectively address the issue and provide the necessary assistance.

The commercialization of the education system in Iranian society has also contributed to the erosion of its primary functions and the transformation of the relationship between schools and families. Schools now prioritize attracting families as customers, sidelining their educational responsibilities. The integral connection between schools and families has become fragmented, reducing the effectiveness of collaboration and support. In this context, counsellors often operate as intermediaries, primarily focused on attracting families and students rather than fulfilling their crucial role in imparting knowledge, including sex education. Consequently, their relationships with students tend to revolve around the school's profit and interests rather than prioritizing the well-being and education of the students.

These systemic shortcomings create significant barriers for children who may find themselves unable to defend against sexual abuse or report incidents to trusted support networks. Studies have consistently shown that many children do not disclose abuse or only do so when they have received prior education on the subject or have access to reliable and secure support systems.

In conclusion, the prevailing denial, lack of sex education, and inadequate support systems within the education system,

family units, and society at large contribute to the perpetuation of child sexual abuse. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and systematic approach that includes proper education, awareness campaigns, increased counsellor presence, and collaborative efforts from all stakeholders involved in child protection.

Personal Factors

Characteristics of sexual abusers

Why do some individuals engage in unethical actions, such as child abuse? What are the characteristics of these individuals? To which social groups do they belong? Numerous research studies and theories have attempted to answer these questions. Although the empirical evidence to address these questions is limited, efforts are made to provide partial answers based on research and theories in this field. It should be noted that a more accurate response would require interviews and data collection from perpetrators of abuse.

One of the studies in this area is conducted by Gerwinn *et al.* (2018). The title of their research is 'Clinical Characteristics Related to Paedophilia and Child Sexual Abuse: Differentiating Sexual Preference from Criminal Status.' The findings of this study indicate that psychiatric disorders, sexual disorders, and negative experiences in childhood were more prevalent among paedophiles and perpetrators of child sexual abuse compared to the control group. The findings also show that perpetrators of sexual abuse and non-offenders differ in terms of age, intelligence level, educational level, and experiences of sexual abuse during childhood. However, paedophiles and non-paedophiles mainly differed in sexual characteristics, such as sexual deviance and the onset and level of sexual activity.

Another relevant study is conducted by Kruger *et al.* (2019). The title of this research is 'Child sexual offenders show prenatal and epigenetic alterations of the androgen system.' The findings of this study indicate that, apart from sexual preferences, perpetrators of child sexual abuse exhibited increased androgen levels during pregnancy compared to children and control non-offender individuals. Scientists

found that sexual offenders had more chemical changes called "methylation" on a gene called the androgen receptor. This suggests that their testosterone system, which affects certain behaviours, may not work as well. They also had lower levels of testosterone in their environment. Additionally, there was a connection between criminal behaviour and how the androgen receptor gene performed.

Another study by Turner and Rettenberger (2020) titled 'Neuropsychological Functioning Among Child Sexual Abusers: A Systematic Review' provides further insights. According to researchers, neuropsychological dysfunction is considered one of the key components in the etiological models of child sexual abuse. The findings indicate that there is more evidence supporting the hypothesis that child sexual abusers have greater impairments in regulation, inhibition, and verbal functioning compared to healthy individuals. However, significant differences were not found when comparing child sexual abusers with healthy individuals. The only finding from one study suggests that paedophilic abusers have better abstract reasoning and planning abilities compared to non-paedophilic child sexual abusers. Executive dysfunction can lead to self-regulation deficits, thus increasing the likelihood of engaging in sexual abuse.

The review findings of this study demonstrate that classifying child abusers based on their motives for committing abuse may help address certain existing inconsistencies in empirical findings. The accumulated findings of the aforementioned studies emphasize the importance of psychological and biological factors among abusers, while paying less attention to economic and social determinants such as social class and gender. Maljoo also emphasized the role of sexual deprivation in his research, and his findings indicated that abusers had experienced sexual deprivation earlier in their lives (Maljoo, 2010).

Individuals who perpetrate sexual abuse exhibit a distinct set of characteristics that differentiate them from individuals who do not engage in such reprehensible behaviour. It is essential to recognize that their actions often occur within a specific contextual framework. In the second chapter, an extensive

examination was conducted, drawing from theories and authoritative sources, to elucidate the multifaceted traits associated with perpetrators of sexual abuse.

Among the key characteristics examined, the following factors were identified:

- 1) Genetic predisposition
- 2) Personality disorders
- 3) Diminished self-control
- 4) Narcissistic tendencies
- 5) Substance abuse, particularly alcohol and drugs
- 6) Compulsive and coercive sexual fantasies
- 7) Attitudes and beliefs that endorse sexual violence
- 8) Preference for impersonal and objectifying sexual relationships
- 9) Hostility towards women
- 10) History of childhood sexual abuse
- 11) Exposure to instances of sexual violence
- 12) Low resilience in the face of failure
- 13) Challenges in anger management
- 14) Impaired interpersonal communication skills
- 15) Limited capacity for empathy and emotional connection within familial relationships
- 16) Inclinations towards paedophilia or hebephilia
- 17) Anti-social and borderline personality traits
- 18) Psychological distress
- 19) Paranoid reactions to sexual stimuli

In addition to the previously mentioned characteristics, the following traits were observed during interviews with perpetrators:

- 1) Struggles with addiction and alcohol dependency
- 2) Psychological disturbances
- 3) Sexual disorders
- 4) Paedophilic tendencies
- 5) Bullying behaviour
- 6) Aggression
- 7) Inflicting harm upon others in various domains

Before delving further into a comprehensive analysis of these characteristics, it is important to begin by discussing a

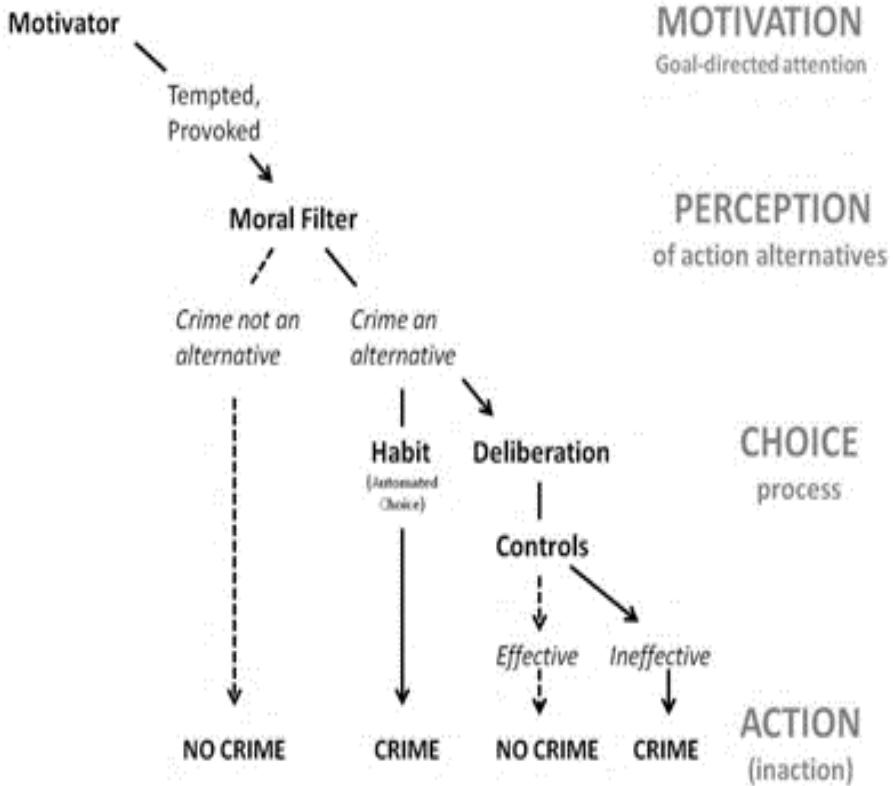


Figure 24 Key Situational Factors and Processes in the Causation of Crime according to Situational Action Theory (Wikström & Treiber, 2016: 1236)

foundational theory that provides a strong basis for understanding criminal behaviours.

One notable theory in explaining behaviours such as child sexual abuse is the situational action theory proposed by Wikström. Child sexual abuse is often defined as a criminal act, and within the situational action theory of crime, ‘essentially, it is an act that violates moral rules. Moral rules prescribe (or proscribe) what is right or wrong’ (Wikström, 2006: 32;). The definition of crime as a violation of moral rules is a key aspect of this definition, and sexual abuse and child sexual abuse are often considered unethical acts in Iranian society. In order to

explain violations of the law, which are criminal acts, Wikström presents various models, one of which is described in the figure.

Based on the aforementioned model, individuals can be stimulated and tempted to engage in sexual abuse. However, when they possess evolved ethical frameworks, sexual abuse is not considered an alternative course of action. Conversely, in the absence of these ethical frameworks, sexual abuse can become a viable option. Some individuals may initially resort to sexual abuse out of habit, whereby the act itself becomes ingrained in their behavioural patterns. This is exemplified by various interview cases where unfortunate children endured prolonged instances of sexual abuse perpetrated by a family member, leading to the normalization of such abusive behaviour within their lives.

Mrs. B, who has been subjected to abuse by her uncle, speaks about him:

Well, back then he used to smoke cigarettes, and the smell of smoke was always present. My mom was suspicious of him and would confront him about it. Later, I realized he was also using drugs, like heroin, but I remember my mom always getting on his case, asking why he smelled like cigarettes. After some time had passed, I found out he had engaged in similar behaviours with other relatives, even with my cousins. He's a despicable person. My uncle is sick, mentally ill. What kind of illness? By illness, I mean he's filthy; he has his eyes on everyone, even his own close relatives. Filthiness is an illness.

This narrative also highlights the phenomenon of sexual abuse as a substitute behaviour rather than a mere habit for Aunt B. But the model presented earlier did not explore the possibility of sexual abuse as a deliberate substitute behaviour. In some cases, when a perpetrator experiences arousal and temptation to engage in abuse, it becomes a substitute behaviour, prompting them to weigh the consequences before committing

the act. Two possible outcomes arise from this scenario: if the perpetrator possesses self-control, they may choose to refrain from carrying out the abusive act; however, if their self-control is lacking, they may proceed with the act. Self-control is commonly believed to be low among perpetrators. However, from a sociological perspective, considering the social characteristics of perpetrators, sexual abuse of children can be viewed as an active behaviour that is influenced by a particular interpretation of the surrounding conditions.

In essence, an individual's actions are shaped by their interpretation of the objective reality they encounter, as influenced by their mental processes. Sexual abuse, as an action, can be better understood by examining both the objective conditions in which the perpetrator is situated and the psychological dimension influenced by these conditions. Psychological characteristics, such as low self-control, are constructed based on a range of objective conditions, including social factors such as class, gender, and personal experiences.

Sexual abuse can be categorized as both a goal-oriented action and an emotional action, as it is driven by the perpetrator's emotions and seeks a specific outcome. By adopting this approach, we can analyse the multilayered and multidimensional aspects of sexual abuse, regardless of its habitual nature. For instance, the perpetrator's own experience of childhood sexual abuse or witnessing sexual violence during their upbringing (social objectivity) shapes their mindset (social mentality) in a way that predisposes them to engage in abusive behaviour when faced with objective conditions (social objectivity) reminiscent of their past experiences (social mentality). Consequently, the perpetration of abuse becomes a habitual response to the reflection of these objective conditions.

However, it is crucial to maintain awareness that the habitual aspect must not overshadow our comprehension of the intentional and purposeful nature of such behaviour. Further investigations and interviews with perpetrators have revealed additional characteristics, notably paedophilia. Paedophilia, characterized by a persistent sexual attraction to prepubescent children under the age of 13 for a minimum duration of six

months, is considered an abnormality. For instance, an expert in child psychology collaborating with this study observed that one abusive mother engaged in sexual acts with her two-year-old child in various locations, using different methods due to the child's small size. It is evident that this mother exhibited signs of paedophilic disorder, as evidenced by her inappropriate behaviour towards the child.

By presenting a more professional tone and refined style, the revised version enhances the clarity and readability of the content while maintaining a rigorous analysis of the subject matter.

In this context, a child expert has made a report regarding one of the abusive mothers:

Sexual acts with the child took place everywhere because the anus of a two-year-old child is small, wherever it was possible. They used their mouths and so on... Today, a team of psychologists and psychiatrists came here as our guests. They were playing and joking with the children, and they took [the name of the boy] aside. This anxiety is not good for him at all; you must bring him when it is normal for us, a child with a mother with paedophilic disorder.

A 26-year-old young man who is a student said:

I admit that I am attracted to young girls, not very young ones, but mostly adolescents. You know, they are blossoming and, according to the law, you can even be involved with 13 or 14-year-old girls. Now, I'm not saying that I have engaged in such activities, but during my teenage years, I had experiences with younger girls, though not to an excessive extent. Nowadays, I see at parties some girls wearing short skirts, and I can't help but stare at them. Honestly, I unintentionally observe others as well, and I notice that they are also looking. I don't know what's wrong with

me, but I have thought about going to a doctor several times, yet I feel embarrassed and afraid. What should I say if I go? Should I admit that I have paedophilic tendencies and such thoughts?

The founder and director of the Iranian AIDS Society said:

One day, I had a meeting with a police chief, and the chief psychologist recognized me. They reported a case to me that was very disturbing: a father was a paedophile and was constantly in contact with his 6-year-old and 9-year-old sons.

Drug and alcohol abuse are also characteristics of perpetrators. It is not claimed that in all cases, their consumption leads to sexual abuse, and there are many individuals who have addiction issues with drugs and alcohol but do not engage in sexual abuse. It is more accurate to say that sexual abuse and drug abuse are a set of behavioural characteristics found in some sexual offenders, rooted in deeper underlying causes such as underdeveloped moral traits, low self-control, and experiences of deprivation and pressure. However, as mentioned, drug use, especially alcohol, can have a role in abuse. Drug and alcohol abuse can contribute to or exacerbate the likelihood of abuse alongside other contextual factors rooted in the individual's psychological and personality structure.

In this regard, a 39-year-old woman named Mrs. Kanani said:

My brother was drunk, and I used to prepare lunch. I was wearing a top and a covered skirt, and at that time, I was still a little girl. There was no one else at home. We had a few tenants who were not there that day. Unfortunately, luck was not on my side, and everything fell into place. It became the most excruciating quarter of an hour for me. Did the complete assault happen? No, no, no, it didn't reach that point. To the extent that he touched me and

undressed me and destroyed me with his fingers. He was heavily intoxicated, completely out of his senses. When he regained consciousness, I told him, but he didn't believe it. He said I was talking nonsense.

In Mrs. Kanani's account, it is clear that the consumption of alcohol played a determining role in the sexual abuse committed by her brother. Mrs. Nouri, a teacher, said about one of her students:

[...] I encountered a young woman who was quite young, had fair skin, and big eyes. She was hesitant to talk about it, but eventually, she opened up about a distressing incident that had stayed hidden for a long time. This poor girl had an unmarried uncle who struggled with addiction. While she was peacefully sleeping in a room, she witnessed someone touching her inappropriately. To try and figure out what was going on, her uncle covered her mouth with his hand. It's important to note that he didn't do it in an innocent way, but rather as a means to assault her and satisfy his own desires.

A social worker also described one of their observations:

There was a case where we followed up with Mr. Almasi. The father was addicted, and in my opinion, the mother had some mental problems. This girl had complete sexual relations with her father.

The psychologist, in response to the question 'Have you ever had the opportunity to meet (the perpetrator) and get a description of their condition?' said:

Yes, once it happened with someone who had recently turned 18 and had a relationship with someone. For example, he used to stay up until 2 a.m., was into drinking, had no mental balance, and smoked. He was 21 years old. Did your counselling have any effect on

him? Unfortunately, there was no cooperation. I saw him for a session, to the extent that I could say something to him, but he wasn't present and was intoxicated.

Addiction and mental imbalance are characteristics of perpetrators: having mental and personality disorders such as antisocial personality can be another characteristic of perpetrators. Since humans are social beings, when they cannot establish constructive relationships with their social environment for various reasons, which often have roots in social life and its foundations in society, they tend towards isolation and loneliness.

It is in this context that antisocial personalities emerge. Sexual abuse, regardless of the moral perspective, is a form of communication with the external world for the perpetrator, who has developed an antisocial personality, and their social life has not allowed them to meet their social needs in a balanced manner through social interactions as a social being. Dr Hassani Abhariyan, a neuropsychological Ph.D. and university professor, has spoken extensively about the relationship between perpetrators and some important characteristics they possess.

... We see these things in a strange and unbelievable way. Now, beyond the issue of stepbrothers and such, we see this issue with uncles and even fathers and grandfathers, but these are the people who have had mental disorders and addictions. I haven't seen anything happen without someone having some kind of disorder. Even the husbands of aunts and sisters, they are all trusted family members, and it happens from their side.

In another account, he said:

What we have studied extensively is that it's not accurate to say they were just perpetrators, but rather to say they are also victims because they themselves are

sick, and many of them have disorders. It is their illness that has driven them to engage in such actions, but it's not justifiable. Someone who doesn't take action is also guilty, but the issue I want to emphasize is not as simple as saying they came with a premeditated plan just because they were male or non-heterosexual or adults. It is always a sick and disorderly mindset; we can say that they mostly suffer from sexual disorders. They are sexually sick if they don't have any other illness. For example, they say that if we capture this criminal, everything will be resolved, but unfortunately, it's not that easy. Many of the perpetrators themselves were victims of sexual abuse in their childhood, which is very common and complicates the issue.

A 35-year-old taxi driver who is a father said:

According to today's definitions, I guess I experienced abuse in my childhood, and I also inflicted abuse. I don't know if these labels are accurate or not. I became a victim and was taken advantage of financially, and I did the same thing to other children. Now that I've grown up, I have to admit that it's like a knot on my soul and mind. Please, for God's sake, don't associate what I'm saying with my name, but I confess that now when I hold a child in my arms, unconsciously my thoughts go towards something sexual. For example, my hand accidentally touches their back or buttocks, and suddenly it feels like an electric shock, and I distance myself from it, as if there's an inclination or fear that such desires might arise, I don't know what it is, maybe you know better. Or sometimes the child sits on my lap, and our genitals come into contact, and immediately I move away, and it's strange for both of us. I'm afraid, and I curse and blame myself, thinking

what kind of dishonourable man I am. Can a person have such thoughts about their own child? Or when I see other children, I steal glances at them, fearing that I might be attracted to them. What the hell is wrong with me? Isn't this related to those fears and traumas from childhood?

The above accounts provide a clear description of abusers, including their characteristics, experiences, and methods of abuse. One such characteristic is the presence of psychological disorders. Additionally, some abusers have themselves experienced childhood sexual abuse, perpetuating a cycle of abuse. It can be argued that for abusers who have suffered childhood sexual abuse, engaging in abusive behaviour serves as a compensatory or coping mechanism from which they derive benefit. This creates a flawed cycle where the same individual, having been abused, becomes the abuser in a different context. Furthermore, literature in this field suggests that childhood abuse can have a lasting impact on subsequent abusive behaviours.

Another aspect they mention is the method of abuse, which often occurs without prior planning or intention. According to the theory of routine activities, the occurrence of criminal acts requires the convergence of three elements: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians (Cohen and Felson, 1979). For example, a child who is alone or a child who is entrusted to others for care is more likely to become a victim of sexual abuse.

Finally, Dr Abhariyan makes an important point, which is that having a disorder does not mean justifying their actions and relieving the ethical responsibility of the abusers. They need treatment and should not be left in society to harm others. Regarding the abusive psychological disorder, a 50-year-old woman with a photography license narrated:

Later on, my irresponsible brother, who had gotten married, had a very nasty wife. Now he's in a psychiatric institution; she was jealous and all that. She

*initiated this relationship with me and seduced me.
Later on, I realized and went to the doctor.*

Ms. R, a master's degree holder in social work, has mentioned bullying as one of the characteristics of several abusers. She says:

I've seen it most in my brother, and many times my mother is aware of it but doesn't take any action because it's a taboo to talk about it outside the home. Sometimes he provides financial support, so they don't confront him. My brother is a bully, and they can't do anything to stop his abusive behaviour towards the child he victimizes. Often, the girl hides it from everyone else.

Of course, the dominance and bullying behaviour of the abuser should be analysed as part of their personality traits, as this person is currently in the position of the perpetrator against the victim. As previously mentioned, these individuals, due to their experience of sexual abuse, have been subjected to dominance in another situation, namely, as the victim during their childhood. As Erich Fromm states, every perpetrator has been a victim in another situation, and vice versa, indicating that this cycle extends depending on the social context in which the individual finds themselves. If the social context promotes dominance or displays signs of it, the person will exhibit dominance in response, and if they find themselves in another social context with a dominant individual, they will become submissive to that dominance. This approach and process also applies to the abuser and the issue of sexual abuse. Samaneh, a 35-year-old woman who was sexually assaulted by her uncle, has described some of her uncle's characteristics as follows:

I was six and a half years old, and many of my female relatives had experienced this kind of touch from him. At that time, I was a bit naughtier and more stubborn, and I was also more fearful because my father had lost his job. My uncle could do something to me. My mother

had a lot of fear about honour and those stories. There was a person who was very aggressive, violent, and intimidating, and everyone was afraid of him. When I saw him with the other kids, I thought they were nothing and shouldn't say anything. He started touching us. I thought it was normal since he had been touching me since I was six, but from the age of seven, my mother would take me to them whenever they wanted to go somewhere because I wouldn't go out of the house. They would leave me at my grandfather's house, where my uncle was, and my older brother and I would go to that store with my cousin.

My cousin's childhood was very beautiful, lively, and cute. I don't know what happened to him in his childhood, maybe he was also abused because suddenly this level of aggression and such things happened to him from a certain age, my mother says that from a certain age, he became like this and he wasn't like this before. Now he has become something that I dislike, he has become strangely religious. People are afraid of him. For what reason? Maybe he will harm himself and others. This person is afraid of everything. Is he single or married now? He got married and divorced. He can't get married at all because there is no love in his eyes, and now that he is living with my grandmother, it is an external torment because you can't tolerate it for a moment because he is extremely controlling. My cousin is now like a puppet with strings, he is controlled, and now sleeps and eats. It hurts him, and so on.

He doesn't have any control over himself. He doesn't take his medications, and I don't want them to come to our house, but I can't tell my mother not to bring your mother and brother here. When they come or when I'm outside, I come home late or say I have work and I go to sleep. But that night, my mother said he's not taking

his medications, and we are worried, and his doctor said they shouldn't be discontinued. I asked him why he's not taking them. Do you think you'll feel better without them? Or do you want to go back to how you were before? When I said this to him, he looked at me and took his medications. My mother asked me what I told him. I said he understands what I'm saying, and it seems like the only person who is not afraid of him and stays in front of him is me. After I started talking to him about what he had done to me and the harm he had caused me, he cried a lot and apologized to me, and I have talked to him a few times. Now I see that he is not in a good state. God knows what I can do. The only thing I can do is forgive him. He has been sick, after all.

The aggression mentioned in the previous statements, regarding the individual identified as the perpetrator, can be seen as a behaviour that stems from the internal emotions of the abuser. According to the sociological approach to emotions, these emotions have their roots in the specific conditions and context in which the abuser has lived. Often, when individuals find themselves in unstable circumstances, they experience dissatisfactions that give rise to negative emotions, ultimately leading to the development of destructive behaviours such as anger and aggression. As previously mentioned, the uncle, who is identified as the abuser, has always been under the control and surveillance of his mother, resulting in a lack of personal autonomy, freedom, and independence. This severe control exerted by his mother has contributed to the emergence of feelings of anger, which have found expression in acts of aggression.

It is important to note that the aggression displayed by the uncle is not limited to one aspect; rather, it manifests in different forms, with one notable aspect being sexual abuse. Interestingly, the same individual exhibits submissive and fearful behaviour in his relationships with his mother and others, while displaying dominance and abusive tendencies towards his victims, who happen to be his nieces. This

observation aligns with Erich Fromm's theory presented in his *Escape from Freedom*.

It is worth mentioning that alongside feelings of fear and anger, which are prominent among the emotions experienced by abusers, they also encounter other conflicting emotions such as possessiveness, control, shame, guilt, and more. Additionally, individuals who engage in abusive behaviour often display emotional voids and a strong desire for attention. They tend to exhibit antisocial tendencies and a preference for isolation.

In the case of Samaneh, she refers to several characteristics of her uncle before and after the instances of abuse. It is crucial to note that Samaneh was not the sole victim of her uncle's sexual abuse; he has also inflicted harm upon other girls. Therefore, his actions were not accidental but rather part of a pattern of behaviour. Another characteristic displayed by the uncle is aggression. In general, individuals with a tendency towards aggression have lower levels of self-control and self-regulation, which leads them to engage in various risky and harmful behaviours. However, when it comes to sexual abuse, the harm is specifically directed towards the victims.

Regarding Samaneh's uncle, it appears that his aggression developed at a certain age or after a particular event. There is a high probability that he himself has experienced sexual abuse, and it can be inferred that the experience of sexual abuse has played a role in his transformation into an abuser, especially in the absence of effective treatment and support. Furthermore, it is evident that he lacks positive emotions such as love, which is a characteristic often associated with individuals exhibiting antisocial personality traits. The fact that he has isolated himself, become religious, and ultimately lost his sense of autonomy indicates the presence of underlying psychological disorders that warrant further investigation and evaluation.

Here are some other experiences that reflect the emotions and predominant characteristics of the perpetrators, as mentioned above:

A 45-year-old male state employee says:

God, it haunts me that it has always been tormenting for me, and perhaps it has turned into a great burden of conscience for him as well, now that he is a teenager. I don't know, but I remember feeling heavy-hearted, and I completely avoid thinking about it now. It's really tough for me to write this. Whatever it was, it wasn't good, and for someone who is now religious, it might be considered very sinful. I've been so frightened that I even suspect my own children, and I see that such incidents are quite common. I've heard from many others who have experienced the same disaster.

A 35-year-old retired woman says:

Every time I remember, I curse and blame myself. Oh God, how could I have had sexual thoughts about my younger brother while playing? Yes, we were both children, maybe 8 or 9 years old, but I was older, and I vividly remember my genitals being erect, and I would touch him over his pants during playtime. Now, when I look at my own children and others, and I read about it, I know it's part of sexual curiosity, but why did it have to turn into this torment for my soul? Two years later, I think I touched him in the bathroom or asked him to touch me, but thank God, I don't know what happened, but it didn't happen again. I suffered for a long time with it.

A 42-year-old restaurant owner says:

I had sex with my daughter several times. I know it's despicable and deserving of death, but I feel a sense of ownership over her, and she says she belongs to me. Sometimes I feel so guilty and pressured that I hit myself or suffocate myself, but I still go back to her. Now, judge me however you want, but if I had any other solution, I wouldn't do this, my God.

A 49-year-old man said:

I have experienced a great deal of suffering, although I am presently in a better and more uplifted state. The mere act of looking at myself in the mirror is unbearable, as it fills me with an overwhelming sense of embarrassment that extends to an unimaginable extent. I feel compelled to express that, in my view, it would be preferable for us to dissolve our existence in acid and thereby purify the world from our presence.

These experiences highlight the deep emotional turmoil and conflicting thoughts experienced by the individuals who have engaged in abusive behaviour. They express feelings of guilt, torment, fear, and a sense of ownership over their victims. Despite the awareness of the wrongness of their actions, they struggle with internal conflicts and find it difficult to break free from these destructive patterns. Importantly, these testimonies provide insight into the psychological state of the abusers and the complex factors that contribute to their behaviour.

Characteristics of victims of abuse

All children are at risk of sexual abuse, but some children are more likely to become victims of abuse due to specific characteristics, particularly those who have been raised in families with violence and punishment. Parents should take the time to calmly and lovingly listen to their children's mistakes but take them seriously. Unfortunately, many victims of abuse and sexual violence are children who have experienced physical punishment and beatings and have become accustomed to violence and aggressive behaviours. The combination of violence and upbringing damages a child's self-esteem. Children with low self-esteem become targets for abusers (Sattari & Khoshnevis, 2019).

As explained in previous sections, victims of abuse are more prevalent in unstable families, crisis-stricken families (conflicts and marital disputes sometimes lead to neglecting children), impoverished families living in deprived

neighbourhoods. These characteristics are often structural. In the second chapter, individual factors that increase the likelihood of 'sexual abuse victimization' were also reviewed, including the following cases: children resulting from unintended pregnancies, children from relationships outside of marriage, children with learning disabilities, physically and mentally disabled children who not only have lower intelligence than normal but also have difficulties in adaptive and conforming behaviours and face significant deficiencies in individual and social problem-solving, understanding the laws of society, and having self-supporting skills, children with mental abnormalities, children who do not report abuse, and children whose parents are often absent from home due to economic problems and full-time work, children from large families or specific circumstances, delinquent children or children living in close proximity to delinquents.

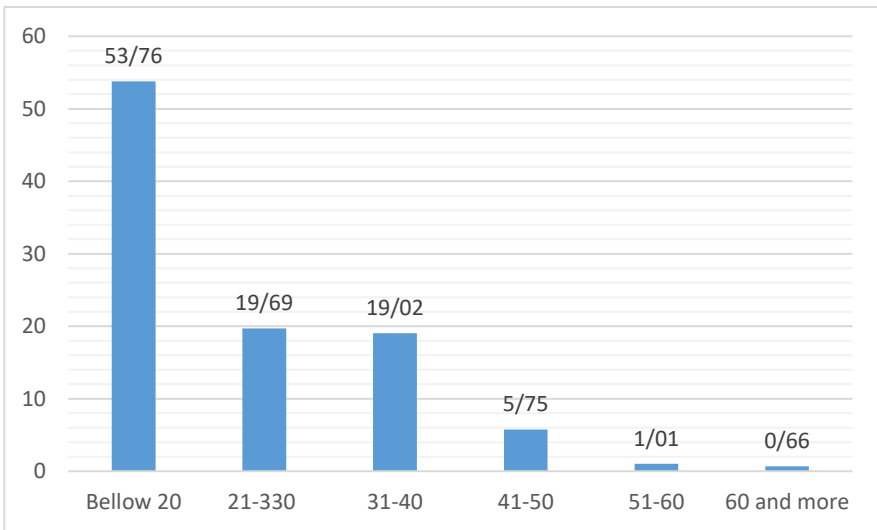


Figure 25 Distribution of respondents according to age

In this study, we have identified several characteristics of abuse victims that somehow increase their vulnerability to abuse and its continuation. These characteristics include physical and mental disabilities, low intelligence quotient, physical differences, being attractive or good-looking, being calm and unable to protest, being different from the local culture,

immigrant children, children with addiction, hyperactivity and bullying tendencies. It needs further study and research to prove that children with these characteristics are more likely to experience abuse; what is presented here is speculative assumptions.

Highlighting these characteristics does not imply that normal children are not subject to abuse, but rather it suggests that this group of children is more likely to be abused. In normal children, their personality and social characteristics are often influenced by the way they are parented and their acceptance by society, which sets the stage for being 'abused'; in a way that in the parenting style, they are either neglected or involved, the family is unbalanced in its structure and functions, and ineffective social acceptance. Usually, children with detrimental personality traits, such as low self-confidence and self-esteem, grow up with negative emotions such as anger, fear, etc., which make them vulnerable to experiencing abuse from others, especially from close individuals, and make them unable to provide an appropriate response to prevent this abuse.

If we look at these characteristics, two prominent points stand out: the inability to defend oneself or the lack of ability to report abuse, and being different from other children. Children who are unable to defend themselves due to reasons such as physical and mental disabilities become easy targets for abusers. Most likely, these abusers lack advanced ethical frameworks and suffer from major personality disorders that lead them to abuse these children. Additionally, in some cases, being different exposes a child to abuse. For example, a man who was a victim of abuse in his childhood said:

Yeah, I think my special feature was my uniqueness. I was a very friendly kid with fair skin, curly golden hair, which is not common in Iran, for example. Children with this appearance or in the environment I was in, and well, my family had a more affluent lifestyle compared to what was relatively available in terms of clothes I wore. It was very different

considering that I had access to current fashion trends, and we belonged to a more modern family. Then I used to joke a lot; I was an adventurous boy, a boy who was involved in discussions with older people and jokes, maybe even older than my age, and I was out of place. I think I somehow created an environment for myself or at least now that I look back at it, I see that I was a separate entity woven from that general and common culture of that region, and I think it had an influence on the issue.

They mention several important characteristics, one of which is being different in terms of physical features. These characteristics include being friendly, playful, adventurous, fair-skinned, chubby, having curly golden hair, and dressing in a different style than the local community. All of these have made them different from the local community, and as they themselves admit, these differences have played a role in their abuse. The next case is reported by Ms. A, a painting teacher and mentor in non-governmental organizations:

The next case is about a twelve or thirteen-year-old boy who comes from a family with four sons. Among these four boys, this particular boy is chubbier and has prominent breasts, which his mother reported to Ms. A. His father mocks him, saying, 'Yeah, it's obvious with those prominent breasts that you're a hermaphrodite, it's obvious you're not a boy and you don't have masculinity.' The mother is sceptical about the father's use of this kind of language and rhetoric with their child regarding his private body shape. When she pays more attention and examines the father's behaviours closely, she realizes that the father is sexually abusing this thirteen or fourteen-year-old boy. She also realizes that several times the father takes the boy to the bathroom with him, engaging in highly unusual behaviours that indicate sexual abuse. The mother

reports this to Ms. Ismaili and seeks help from them. It should be noted that the father is also addicted.

This child also had certain physical characteristics that set him apart from his other brothers, such as being overweight and having prominent breasts, which led to his father assaulting him. In these statements, the distinction in the child's features is introduced as a background and factor for sexual abuse by others close to him. This distinction can hinder the child's integration and harmony within the family and other social groups with whom the child interacts, and it can be a factor in the child's increased visibility, which can result in sexual abuse, as mentioned in the narrative of experiences. However, the statements indicate that these distinctions have become internalized within the individual and have become part of their beliefs, which they regularly express. This belief based on differentiation can, in certain situations, prevent the individual from integrating into groups and acquiring skills through living and group experiences, and it can itself be a factor in enabling abuse and the individual's failure to defend themselves against it, as they lack the necessary skills gained through group interactions.

Mrs. B, who was assaulted by her uncle and the neighbourhood grocer, said:

When we were in family gatherings or among friends, I always attach great importance to dressing up. For example, I always want to wear something stylish. This characteristic has been with me since childhood. I loved bags, shoes, and clothes. On the one hand, now I'm saying that it's not me saying it, but people around me used to say it when we gathered at a party. They all used to say I was innocent and had a beautiful figure. Then they would say, for example, at a ceremony, I was their dancer. They would say, 'Masoomeh, please burn esfand [a traditional Persian herb believed to ward off evil spirits] for yourself.' I was quite chubby and fair-skinned at that age.

They have also mentioned characteristics such as being chubby and fair-skinned, dancing beautifully, and wearing stylish clothes, which likely made them a more attractive target for abusers. A 21-year-old woman, currently a social work student, has stated:

... But what could possibly attract someone to me is that they knew I was a quiet and calm girl, I didn't scream, they knew me; and if I were to think about it myself, maybe it's because I have a big butt, maybe it has been genetic since childhood, creating a sexual attraction for them. But I don't think so, I don't know. I didn't have any particular attractiveness as a child except for such things.'

Mrs. A has mentioned another characteristic as follows:

In general, abusers target children who are nonverbal or children from troubled and chaotic families.

In the above statements, reference is made to children who have characteristics as being untalkative and lacking appropriate communication skills. This lack of skills makes them vulnerable to being chosen by sexual abusers. On the other hand, children from unstable families with structural and functional issues are more exposed to sexual abuse. Both of these characteristics decrease the likelihood of resistance against the abuser and, as a result, after the abuse, the abuser faces lower risks and consequences from the victim or their family and support networks. These families and individuals are unable to provide care for themselves and their children. Therefore, abusers know that they can easily find their targets and are less likely to face complaints and demands for justice from the victims or their families.

Migrant children are also in a similar situation. In Iran, where a significant portion of migrants come from Afghanistan, they are at higher risk of various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse. In many cases, due to fear of harsher treatment, inability to seek help from the police, fear of arrest and deportation, and similar reasons, they are unable to report

abuse. As a result, they become more accessible targets for abusers and are unable to defend themselves. Afghan children also make up a considerable portion of child labourers, experiencing different forms of sexual abuse in various labour situations.

Afghan children have been particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, as social support for them in Iranian society is very weak. They face not only the deprivation of basic citizenship rights but also discrimination based on their identity, resulting in a complete denial of their rights as citizens. The absence of social support and policies specifically designed for this social group, which represents a significant portion of Iranian society, has led to elevated rates of sexual abuse among children in this group in Iran. In fact, Afghans are not recognized as citizens in Iranian society and therefore do not enjoy even the minimum rights and protections, which further exposes their children to exploitation (see Ahmady, 2021, for further information on the abuse of this group of children).

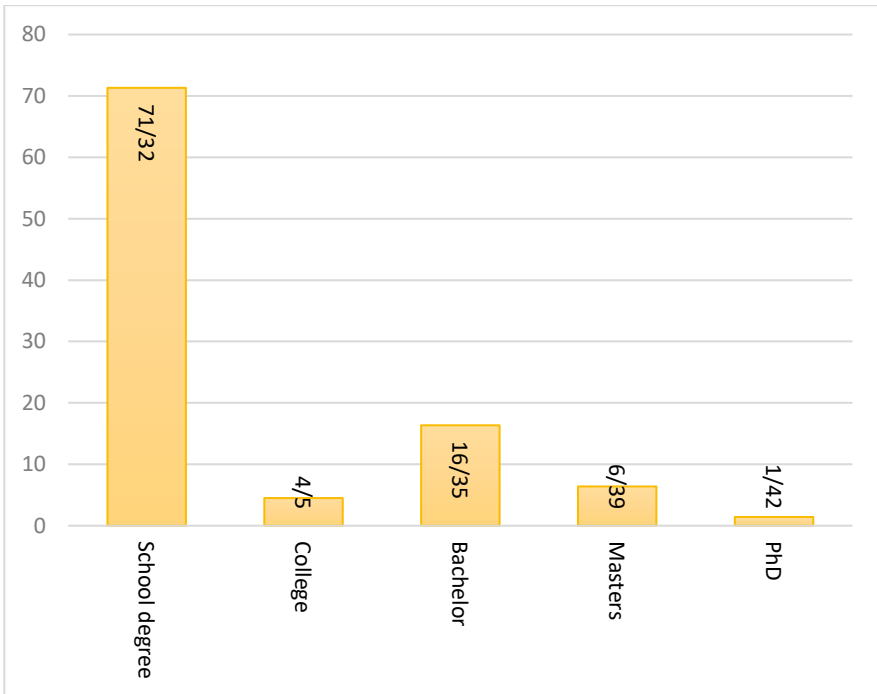


Figure 26 Distribution of respondents by education level

In this regard, a psychologist describes a case involving an Afghan adolescent client:

The day she contacted me, she sounded anxious and overwhelmed on the phone. She said, 'Madam, I'm going to commit suicide because I was raped. Today, on my way to school, I asked him to give me a chance to meet and discuss what to do next.' I quickly arranged a meeting with her and soon heard her story. She told me that two men forcibly took her to a partially constructed building from the street she took to school, where both of them sexually assaulted her. She added that these men had done the same thing to other girls from the same school on multiple occasions. However, whenever they tried to file a complaint, the law did not support them. They were told that first, their father had to come to court with them. This dissuaded them from

proceeding with the complaint. Apparently, both perpetrators were well aware of this fact, and they targeted Afghan girls from that school as their victims.

Another category includes children who suffer from disabilities. Children with psychiatric disorders, speech impairments, and physical disabilities, among other conditions, are targeted by abusers for various reasons. Sometimes, parents and other family members may perceive these children as a source of family problems and, as a result, subject them to abuse because they know that these children are unable to defend themselves. Characteristics such as speech and hearing disorders, physical disabilities, and mental impairments prevent the child from reporting the abuse to others, making it easier for abusers to target them with a sense of impunity. These characteristics are likely not exclusive to a particular community and exist in all societies. However, the treatment of this group of children varies in different countries based on the level of development and the social and economic conditions of each society.

In a society like Iran, which is currently grappling with developmental issues and experiencing socio-economic instability, socially marginalized groups such as the mentally and physically disabled do not receive adequate support. They lack support in terms of living facilities, physical environment, and social and cultural interactions, as the community's awareness of these groups is low (both socially and psychologically). Children belonging to these marginalized social groups, like Afghan children, do not benefit from social support and social policies. This itself becomes a factor that leads abusers to target them more, as choosing these children for abuse entails fewer subsequent consequences and risks due to the lack of support for such children from society. The external realm of society has led these children, who have lower self-esteem and greater personal insecurities, to also feel fear and vulnerability within themselves. Consequently, they are not equipped with the necessary skills to defend themselves against abusers.

In fact, both Afghan children and disabled children (both physically and mentally) are marginalized by society due to these characteristics and are constantly subjected to abuse. In some cases, these two groups of children are also rejected and disliked by their families due to their own issues. Due to the lack of support from society and social institutions for these specific groups of children in Iran, Iranian families, feeling exhausted and helpless, may unintentionally resort to abusing them.

Dr Morris Setudegan, a psychotherapist, commented,

A few cases aside, we had both relatives and young girls whom we took away from their families and gave them to the Girls of Jihad. These were the ones who were subjected to assault by their stepfathers, meaning the mothers were marrying and both cases were nurses. Fathers were exploiting young girls. I had other cases where the perpetrator was their own father or their brother, and this brother had mental problems and cognitive impairments, but these four examples are exceptions.

Mrs. J, a social worker from the Mehr-o-Mah Foundation, said:

We had a case where a child with cognitive impairments was referred to me for follow-up. This case is now 11 years old, and unfortunately, as a teenager of about 16, he has been sexually abused. It seems that he has developed a sense of pleasure from it and is now engaging in self-gratification.

Mrs. P, from a non-governmental organization, said:

We had a difficult case where a child's mother forced her into prostitution from the age of 7. The mother was obese, and as far as we know, she has been overweight since that time. When the child reaches the age of 12, the mother tells her that she should sleep with her three

brothers and instructs the boys to bring in money and sleep with others. It is uncertain whether they are safe or not.

Mr. Riyazati, a lawyer, said:

... There are also many cases of children with mental disabilities who have been systematically abused, even in treatment centres and welfare institutions.

Mrs. M, a psychologist in the city of Sanandaj, said:

You know, I work in a village, and there I came across a situation where a girl with hearing and speech impairments experienced sexual assault at the hands of her own brother. Due to her fear, the girl was unable to communicate the incident. Shockingly, the abuse persisted, eventually resulting in the girl, who already had hearing and speech impairments, becoming pregnant.

Addiction is another characteristic of abused individuals that puts them at risk:

A thirteen-year-old child with an obsessive mother and an excessively compulsive father. They divorced when the child was four years old, and after that, the child was subjected to abuse. Since the child was already addicted to drugs, when in such situations, people would approach and take advantage of them, and they wouldn't realize what was happening.

The director of a centre for children with disorders and drug abuse said:

It happens a lot that they try to make a child addicted and exploit them sexually or non-sexually. Families living in high-risk neighbourhoods like Darvazeh Ghar,

which is dangerous, and the areas around Tehran, like Varamin and the surrounding villages.

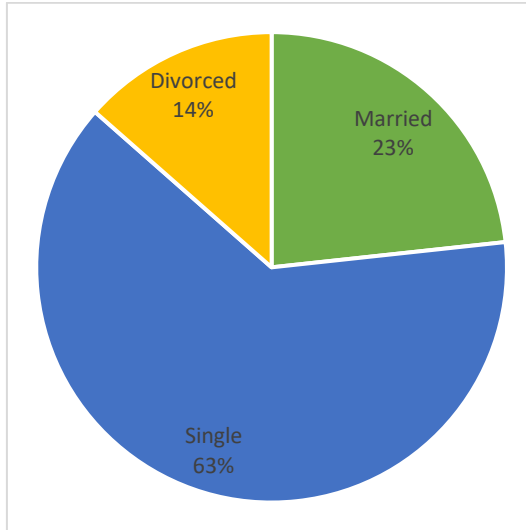


Figure 27 Distribution of respondents by marital status

The passage highlights that while some abused individuals may possess certain characteristics that make them vulnerable to abuse, many children who experience various forms of sexual abuse do not have any specific traits or disabilities. Even normally developing children can be subjected to different forms of sexual abuse, and it is often the sexual abuse itself that leads to the development of specific characteristics such as withdrawal and isolation among them. It is important to note that when typically developing children experience abuse, their personal and psychological characteristics, as well as their skills and emotions, should be analysed and monitored. Weaknesses in skills such as assertiveness and critical thinking, as well as weak personality traits such as low self-esteem, antisocial behaviour, and introversion, along with negative emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, and shame, create an environment for sexual abuse to occur and perpetuate. These characteristics and negative emotions have roots in social life and societal foundations.

For example, Mrs. J mentioned:

I don't have any specific traits, but I know I was always an active and lively girl. I was happy. For example, I remember until the age of 7 or 8, I was always energetic. But after that incident, a lot changed in me, and I started being drawn to a different direction, and I realized I was different from others in many ways. I think my awareness of sexual issues formed after those incidents. Now, I really think I'm different from people and low in energy.

In conclusion, it can be said that sexual abuse has such a tremendous and devastating impact on a child's psyche that it can transform their childhood from a happy state to a sad and depressed one. It can also disrupt a child's normal life trajectory and determine the age at which the child has suffered the most significant damage. One of the most significant consequences of child sexual abuse is the psychological, social, and later cognitive fixation of the child at the age and situation in which the abuse occurred. In other words, the individual's development is halted during that specific period of time.

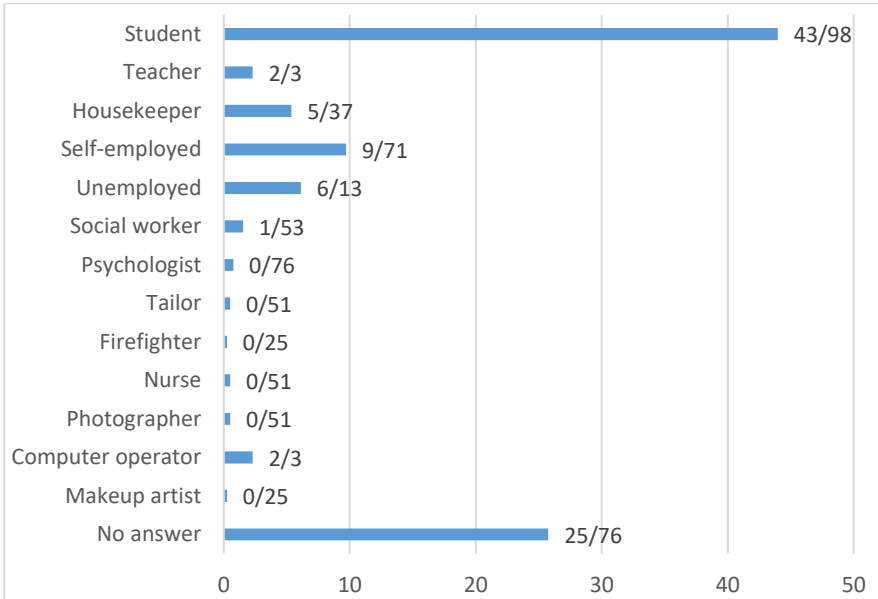


Figure 28 Distribution of respondents by occupation

Strategies and tactics of sexual abuse

Strategies and tactics of sexual abuse refer to the actions and behaviours that perpetrators have engaged in. In other words, interactions, strategies, or tactics are the flow of actions, interactions, and emotions that occur in response to child sexual abuse. However, these are not exclusive to the victims, as perpetrators also employ a series of strategies and tactics to initiate and perpetuate abuse. Society, including individuals, institutions, and organizations, also responds to child sexual abuse. This section considers the techniques and strategies used by perpetrators to abuse and sustain abuse, avoidance strategies employed by victims to prevent further sexual abuse, anticipation of judgment and reactions from others, and the responses and feedback from surrounding individuals and institutions.

Perpetrator techniques

Perpetrators employ various techniques to achieve their goal of abusing children. Even those perpetrators who act without prior planning and improvise in the moment may still utilize

techniques. Some of these techniques are premeditated, while others are used unconsciously during the act of abuse.

The findings from the previous chapters indicate that perpetrators employ strategies such as coercion and physical violence, emotional manipulation and intimidation, economic strategies, and deception to trap their victims. Perpetrators may employ a combination of different techniques simultaneously or at different stages of the abuse. For example, they may initially use threats, but once they gain the child's compliance, they may switch to emotional manipulation and intimidation.

The identified techniques in this study include threats, deception, the use of force and coercion, showing affection and seeking consent, rationalization, blackmail, grooming, and ultimately exploitation (being sold by parents and being bought by the perpetrator). It should be noted that some forms of sexual abuse do not require the use of techniques because the perpetrator does not intend to harm the victim. For example, when a child witnesses or overhears their parents engaging in sexual activity. The following section provides an examination of each of the mentioned techniques.

Using the technique of threats: Perpetrators have utilized this technique for two main reasons. Firstly, to compel the victim to continue enduring the abuse, and secondly, to prevent disclosure of the abuse. They have demanded that the victim keep the incidents secret, and if not, they threaten them with various consequences such as murder, harm to other family members, divorce of the mother, expulsion, violence, and so on. This section provides a collection of quotes related to this technique. Dr Setudegan, a psychotherapist, stated:

Why do you think it's your duty to be with your father? He says if I didn't do it, my mother would divorce him. Indirectly supporting the mother. These three reasons that women bring up surprise me, and I want to say something: From childhood, they lose their confidence in the system outside and don't trust anyone.

Dr Abhariyan, a university professor, said:

Often, the children themselves are frightened and threatened by the person who subjects them to abuse. They say not to tell anyone, and because of the ugliness of this issue, both the family and the child hide it.

These statements indicate that there is organized complicity between the person who experiences abuse, i.e., the child as the victim, and their family, who are responsible for protecting and defending them against the abuser. Their common goal is to conceal or deny the abuse to preserve their honour because child sexual abuse is considered a shameful matter that should be kept hidden to avoid disgrace. Therefore, this organized complicity is established and occurs.

Another issue [regarding non-disclosure of abuse] is the threats made by the perpetrator, saying that they will kill the child if they tell anyone.

The clinic director and therapist have stated in various accounts like this one:

When I was a child, I was threatened that they would kill your mother and give your father to the police. They had these kinds of threats. Or they would say, 'If you speak, we'll kill you, and no one will understand.' It was mostly because of the threats they faced. The child was very upset and was told, 'You don't have a father and brother; I can easily harm your mother and sister.' The child was threatened, and they remained silent.

Ms. S., a social activist and teacher, expressed:

Until around the age of 23 or 24, when they face unwanted advances and traumatic experiences, these individuals may encounter threats related to those incidents. As a result, they lose trust in men altogether.

Ms. B, a social worker active in the field of social harms, has spoken about one of her clients who sought help due to problems in their marital relationship. She said:

The first person who assaulted her was her father's niece, meaning someone of the same gender who was acting as a caregiver for this girl instead of her mother. But this girl, with herself, engaged in a sexual relationship and caused harm. For example, she would say, 'You have to do what I tell you,' or 'Look at me. If you don't do this, I will tell your father, who has hidden cameras in the television and watches you. If you don't listen, I will tell him,' and she forced her to comply.

Ms. J says:

That guy threatened me for about 3 to 4 months. He was a truly despicable person (sorry for using this word), but he promised me marriage and told me to tell my family. I endured all his harassment and abuse, endured his beatings and humiliations, and tried to protect him because he had laid hands on me. I thought, maybe I should marry him.

The above statements indicate that the prevailing approach by families and society towards child sexual abuse is one of shame, leading to concealment and denial. As a result, the minds of abused children are shaped based on this approach, and they internalize and institutionalize the belief that denying the abuse is the appropriate response. Thus, organized complicity in denying the abuse emerges between the abusers, who exert power, and the abused children, who are the victims subjected to that power. Ultimately, the abused individual may resort to the idea of marriage to legitimize the abuse, even though it is universally recognized as a heinous act.

Amir said:

Suddenly, the abusers approached me, tied my hands together, and began to sexually assault me. They

recorded this incident on video. They don't remember the details of this event very well to describe, but the coach who filmed the scenes always threatened them to listen to their demands. Wherever I was, they would come and allow me to have this relationship with them, or else they would release the video.

Based on the above statements, the mechanism of threat by the abuser is successfully employed because abuse is seen as a shameful act, and the abused individual is labelled as a victim, while they fear exposing it due to the shame associated with it. Therefore, the abuse remains hidden and concealed by the abused individual, and that's why they respond positively to the abuser's threats. A psychologist from the Talou-e-Bineshan Center, quoting one of the beneficiaries, said:

A 34-year-old woman who has been sexually abused by her stepfather since childhood is the third child in the family. The stepfather, who is a family member, told her that she shouldn't tell her mother, otherwise he would do the same to her two sisters, and he threatened her with the consequences that would befall her. He forced her to remain silent, and when the relationship became more established, it was so brutal that the girl's body and mind suffered damage, and she experienced numbness, weakness, and fatigue. During that time, to avoid suspicion from other family members about this issue, when she was in that state, he took her to the basement and kept her hidden until her general condition improved and she reappeared among the rest of the family members. For years, this matter remained suppressed, and the girl continued to suffer and be harmed until one day, the mother accidentally came home and confronted this scene. She kicked out the man who was their stepfather, but the only thing the mother did was look at them with anger without seeking further complaints or taking serious actions.

In the above account, it is evident that the perpetrator is a paedophile who selectively targets the youngest child among his stepdaughters, as children under the age of 12 are more appealing to individuals with paedophilic tendencies. The threat to the child extends beyond physical abuse and includes emotional manipulation, as the perpetrator coerces the child into silence by telling her that if she reveals the secret, he will do the same to her two other sisters. The threat of further abuse to the sisters serves as a strategy employed by the perpetrator to perpetuate the cycle of harm.

As the previous narratives indicate, perpetrators of child abuse employ various techniques of threat to inflict harm on children and sustain their abusive behaviour. They are aware that children are vulnerable and unable to protect themselves, thus they exploit this vulnerability by threatening them, thereby inflicting harm and prolonging the abuse. The experiences of such abuse and violence erode the trust of children in their external environment, undermining their ability to report the abuse and allowing it to persist.

The narratives demonstrate that child abuse has repercussions on children's social capital, including trust, security, and honesty within their immediate social and living environment. As a result, survivors of abuse tend to avoid actions involving disclosure and interaction with the social sphere around them. This highlights the connection between child sexual abuse and the erosion of social capital in society at large.

Use of Deception

In the absence of sex education and awareness for children, they may easily fall victim to the deception of an abuser. Abusers may present themselves as good people, supporters, or positive role models and inflict harm on the child. Sometimes, deception occurs through buying toys, giving money, or engaging in games. The use of deception by abusers indicates that the child has suppressed needs, typically emotional needs and the need for attention, which have been unanswered or ignored by the significant others in their life, such as parents and caregivers who are responsible for their care and well-being. Children who face suppressed or unmet

needs, lack of visibility, and insufficient attention are more likely to respond positively to the deception of abusers.

Ms. A, a painting teacher and mentor, said:

When this young girl arrived at the institution with a man who was around fifty years old and appeared significantly older, all the teachers and instructors became sceptical about their relationship. The girl held this man's hand so affectionately that when they asked who he was, she said he was her stepfather who had provided refuge for her and her mother. During the interview with the man, he said, 'Well, I have my own family and my own life, but because they had financial problems, I took them in.' Mrs. Ismaili said that one could discover from the nature of the relationship and intimacy this girl had with this man that it was a sexual relationship. It was quite evident. One can conclude that he has hit two birds with one stone, taking both the mother and the daughter under his wing, and now, according to him, providing them refuge. They have a close relationship, and it is clear that they have experiences beyond a father-daughter relationship.

A woman, a clinical psychology master's degree holder, shared the following story:

For instance, there was a girl named Mahboubeh, who was 11 years old. She mentioned that whenever she wanted to play in her room, her father would come in and stare at her. He would suggest playing together and say, 'Let's play together.' She expressed her discomfort, saying, 'You're my dad, and I'm your daughter. Don't think of me as your wife, and don't invade my personal space.' However, he would hold her tightly and start touching her inappropriately. As her body reacted to the stimulation, her mother would come in and see her daughter feeling unwell, appearing

drowsy and disoriented. This pattern repeated a second time, with the father again engaging in similar behaviour, including inappropriate touching towards his daughter.

The clinic manager and therapist have said:

I had an uncle who used to do such things. When the child was around five years old, he would take the child, saying that he wanted to take them out and have fun. The family, unaware and naive, would allow it. He would take the child out in the morning for a walk and in the afternoon as well. We followed up on the situation and discovered that his wife had left him due to his anger issues. He was living alone in the house, taking care of the child and doing his own thing. He would buy toys or gifts for the child and deliver them to the house. They seemed happy, as if it was a kind uncle.

Ms. K said:

Ahhh, well, he was our neighbour. My grandfather used to do these things. I would feel disgusted, but he seemed happy. He would give me money to let him kiss me.

Mrs. M, the director of the institution, said:

He is a 14-year-old boy. His mother forced him to have sexual relations with her so that he wouldn't engage in relationships with other women and get infected.

The narratives described above depict relationships between a mother and son that are characterized by ownership and possessiveness. These relationships are marked by an excessive and unhealthy dependency, where the mother asserts control and treats the child as an object to be owned rather than a person to be nurtured. This sense of ownership undermines the mother's role as a caregiver, as she fails to fulfil

her responsibility of teaching the child about love and fostering healthy emotional development.

The concept of love is fundamental to human connections and forms the basis for how individuals relate to the social world around them. The first experiences of love are typically encountered in the mother-child relationship, which serves as a crucial template for understanding and engaging in loving relationships within the broader social context. Children learn about love, trust, and emotional connection through their interactions with their mothers.

However, when a child is subjected to possessive relationships instead of experiencing genuine love from their mother, their understanding of love becomes distorted. They come to perceive love as an attachment rooted in possessiveness and imbalanced dependencies. This skewed perception shapes their connection with the social world they inhabit, leading to relationships characterized by unequal power dynamics, emotional manipulation, and even forms of abuse.

The consequences of these distorted relationships can extend into adulthood, as individuals may unknowingly reproduce the patterns they learned in their formative years. This can manifest in the form of masochistic and sadistic relationship dynamics, where individuals either derive pleasure from being mistreated or derive pleasure from inflicting pain on others.

In conclusion, the narratives underscore the detrimental impacts of parent-child relationships rooted in ownership and possessiveness. These relationships hinder the development of healthy emotional bonds and distort the understanding of love, leading to long-lasting implications for individuals' future relationships and their overall well-being.

Mr. K said,

Yeah, when I was very young, around four or five years old, I realized that my uncle would try to lure me to sleep next to him, but he couldn't succeed, and I became aware of it.

Ms. F, the psychologist, has mentioned,

This case, which happened when he was nine years old and such, involved abuse by his cousin. His cousin has abused him several times, and he would say that let's recite the Quran together so that God forgives us. It involved sticking their bodies together and sleeping on top of each other.

Sheida said:

He was my cousin, and at first, he deceived me and forced me into doing this, but it seems like he gained control over my heart afterward. When he would say, let's do this, I wouldn't resist much anymore.

Ms. B told us:

[...] I think I was about 6 years old at that time, I wasn't going to school, and that boy, I don't know if he was 17 or 18 years old, I was very young, he took me to the back [inside the supermarket behind the refrigerator], made me sleep on the floor, slept on top of me, rubbed himself against me, then he got up and gave me a piece of chocolate and said, 'Go back home,' and he opened the door for me.

Gaining consent technique: The use of this technique is, in a way, deceiving the child. Abusers sometimes manipulate children by using their words to gain their consent. One of the survivors told us:

Yes, I'm sorry to say that it was possible to get close through affectionate gestures, and even though I had the ability to resist, I didn't prevent it.

Another survivor said,

Well, there wasn't a direct threat, it was more about gaining consent. Now, in the first case, we can say it was about gaining consent, it was a manipulation, and in the context of what happened between me and that

boy, well, he was much older, and we can say it was about manipulation regarding money, power, age, and all of these factors had an influence on the situation.

And another survivor said,

At first, I was definitely embarrassed and uncomfortable, but gradually I justified it to myself that this must exist. I think it was due to guidance.

The above accounts indicate that there were emotional voids and lack of attention in the abused children, which were exploited by the abusers through emotional manipulation, and the response given was based on companionship, which facilitated the continuation of the abuse. Ms. B, a school and clinic counsellor, expressed:

One of the cases that was shocking was a 23-year-old woman who was sexually assaulted by her mother's uncle. She says, at first, I had doubts about why he was showing me so much affection and attention, but gradually it escalated, and these touches increased to the point that during my middle school years when this happened, I was emotionally involved, as if I enjoyed it.

Mr. S, a school teacher, reported:

The boy had a stepmother, and he was sexually exploited by his stepmother. I was a teacher at the Children's Correction and Training Center in high school. My understanding was that first she established an intimate relationship with the child, even to help him with his well-being, like bathing and such. Then, when the child's trust was gained, the assault and abuse took place.

Ms. H, a social worker at Nasser Khosrow Children's Home, said:

The mother was separated from the father, and the daughter was living with her father. The father had a friend whom he trusted a lot, and they had interactions. That friend took advantage of the situation and manipulated the girl by showing affection, like buying things for her, and he sexually assaulted her multiple times.

The use of force and coercion: The use of force and coercion refers to the use of physical power for assault or abuse, as mentioned in the case of Amir earlier. Abusers, being physically stronger and older than children, can easily employ this tactic. This technique is predominantly used for sexual assault or attacks. Shida has stated in this regard:

We used to live in a village, and sometimes I would go with my cousin to tend to the sheep. Once we were behind the school in the village, and he asked me to come inside the school bathroom to show me something. At first, I hesitated, but eventually, it seemed like I went in. There, he pulled down my pants and placed his genitals between my legs. I was scared and kept crying. He forced himself on me.

Mrs. S., a social activist in the field of children's issues, said:

Listen, I sent you a recording of one of my friends. She was around 7 or 8 years old. We had a supermarket near our house, and there was a man, maybe his father, who would come and linger there. One morning, when she went, this old man cornered her and touched her inappropriately.

Mrs. B says:

The next case reported by Mrs. B was a 17-year-old Afghan girl. She had six siblings, and they were all at home, with her being the fourth child. Her father was a day labourer, and her mother was illiterate and a

homemaker. She reported that they used to commute to school through an alley in the neighbourhood. One day, two young men forcefully took her son into a half-built structure and sexually assaulted him anally, which caused severe distress afterward.

The statements above shed light on the dynamics of power and control in cases of child abuse. It is evident that perpetrators exploit their physical and physiological advantage over children, who are inherently weaker in terms of physical strength. However, the sole presence of a stronger physique and physical power does not automatically justify or sufficiently explain the motivation behind the abusers' actions. Instead, it serves as a conditional factor that facilitates the occurrence of assault and harassment.

In addition to physical strength, the abusers employ tactics such as coercion and manipulation to exert control over their victims. They take advantage of the vulnerability and innocence of children, capitalizing on their trust and dependence on authority figures. The lack of attention, neglect, and absence of protective measures on the part of caregivers, officials, and guardians create an environment conducive to the perpetration of abuse.

Children rely on the presence of responsible adults to provide a safe and nurturing environment. When these protective figures fail to fulfil their duty of care, it leaves children defenceless and susceptible to exploitation. The absence of adequate supervision, emotional support, and guidance further exacerbates their vulnerability.

It is crucial to recognize that child abuse is not solely a result of physical strength disparities between the abuser and the victim. The power dynamics at play encompass a range of factors, including psychological manipulation, emotional coercion, and the misuse of authority. By employing strategies that exploit the inherent power imbalance, abusers ensure their control and dominance over the child.

To effectively prevent and address child abuse, it is imperative to address the systemic issues that contribute to its occurrence.

This involves implementing comprehensive child protection policies, promoting awareness and education on child rights and safety, and fostering a supportive environment where children feel empowered to speak up against abuse. Providing resources and support to caregivers, officials, and guardians helps them fulfil their responsibilities in safeguarding children from harm.

Ultimately, combating child abuse requires a collective effort from society as a whole. By prioritizing the safety and well-being of children, we can strive towards creating a world where every child is protected, valued, and given the opportunity to thrive free from the fear of abuse and exploitation.

The use of the buying and selling method: In this case, the child abuser purchases the child from their guardian or parents. Poverty and addiction play a significant role in this matter. When a family becomes addicted for any reason and loses everything in this process, perhaps the last option for the addicted parents is to sell their child to the abuser in order to obtain substances. An employee of the Child Labour Association in the Shush neighbourhood stated:

For years, a father would take his young daughter with him to Shush because he wanted drugs. He would wander around the drug dens to make money, but there was no sexual involvement. However, she was being harassed. She didn't know she was being abused. She thought it was something she could do.

In the above case, the poverty of awareness alongside the economic poverty of the child's father who is subjected to abuse is evident. This confirms the hypothesis that deprivation has extensive dimensions, with economic or financial deprivation being just one aspect, albeit the most significant one, as economic or material deprivation sets the stage for other dimensions of deprivation and is, in a sense, a prerequisite for all other dimensions. Deprivation, in all its dimensions, provides the groundwork for child sexual abuse.

Mrs. H, a social worker, quoting one of her clients, said:

The daughter of this lady told me that when she was younger, her cousin used to live with us. I should mention that Afghans rent a house and give the rooms to their relatives. She said, 'When my cousin lived with us, we gave him a room. He would touch me, and I told my mother that he was touching me.' I told my mother, and she said, 'I need the money. It's better if you tolerate it.' So, she somehow sold me! Yes, actually, she said that my cousin left. I met a boy in this area, an Iranian, and he has a lot of girlfriends, and they even engage in group sex. He buys colourful underwear for me and says, 'Yes, Let's be together!'

The mentioned example highlights the interdependence between the basic needs of Afghan immigrants and the sexual abuse of their children. These immigrants face deprivation of basic needs and minimum human rights in Iranian society. This deprivation, coupled with the challenging conditions experienced in Iranian society, creates a conducive environment where their children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

In the context of child marriage, the issue of child selling is sometimes brought up. For instance, impoverished families perceive their daughters as an economic burden and seek to alleviate some of that burden by marrying them off. In certain cases, families even receive a monetary sum, known as 'shirbaha,' (bride price) from the groom's family. This practice is prevalent among Afghan families.

Furthermore, we have observed that with the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and the subsequent increase in poverty within the country, some families resorted to selling their children to others as a means of survival. These dire circumstances subject children to the ultimate form of suffering, as they experience marriage and sexual relationships at a young age. Child abuse becomes deeply entrenched and persists for extended periods.

It is important to recognize that in such situations, child abuse takes on an institutionalized nature, perpetuated by societal norms, economic hardships, and the desperation of families seeking survival. The exploitation and violation of children's rights are deeply concerning and require comprehensive efforts to address the root causes and provide support and protection to vulnerable children and their families.

Addicting children

In some cases, particularly when a child is under the care of an irresponsible guardian, there is a possibility that they may be addicted to drugs and subjected to sexual exploitation for the purpose of drug trade and sale. In such circumstances, since the child lacks any financial means to acquire drugs, the abuser may repeatedly exploit them by providing drugs and addicting them through manipulative strategies. The director of a centre for children with disorders and drug abuse told us:

In environments characterized by vulnerability and dependency, the likelihood of experiencing sexual abuse, becoming involved in drug trafficking, and being sold increases. It is distressing that it is common for individuals to intentionally addict children and exploit them both sexually and non-sexually.

The above narratives reveal that perpetrators utilize the technique of addicting children precisely because it creates a strong dependency based on the need for consumption. Through this method, they can establish a foundation for abuse and prolong it by addressing the addictive needs of the child, thereby exploiting their dependency.

Abusing a child while they are asleep: Sometimes, perpetrators may take advantage of a child's state of unconsciousness or vulnerability and subject them to abuse. For example, as mentioned in Chapter Two, when victims are under the influence of alcohol, there is a higher likelihood of sexual violence being perpetrated against them. Among the interview samples, there were no instances of using alcohol or impairing the child's consciousness, but there were cases of

abusing the child while they were asleep, when their awareness was diminished. A 33-year-old woman, who is a social worker herself, shared her childhood experience:

At the age of 11, I experienced inappropriate touching in the chest area by my father. This would happen in the middle of the night when I was asleep. However, I would become aware of it and wake up. But the intensity of this occurrence was unbelievable for me because it came from a man who was considered my first love and the best father in the world, both in my opinion and in the eyes of others. I would go back to deep sleep either feeling heavily shocked or as if I were in a daze, and I remained under the influence of this event for years.

Mrs. B had mentioned:

One day, I was asleep at home. For example, my uncle would come and go, bringing something. It was my sister's house, and it was in the morning. I was sleeping, and then I have a habit. When I fall asleep, I place my hand on my head, meaning I sleep on my side. I developed this habit to overcome that bad memory. Then I saw my uncle come in. I was in that state between sleep and wakefulness, and I saw him put something in my hand.

The statements provided highlight the disturbing nature of child abuse, specifically the act of abusing children while they are asleep or in a vulnerable state. The narratives illustrate the emotional and psychological impact of such abuse on the victims.

The first statement emphasizes the abuser's manipulation of the child's unconsciousness or impaired state, taking advantage of their vulnerability. It highlights the correlation between alcohol use and an increased likelihood of sexual violence against children. This underscores the importance of

addressing drug abuse issues and raising awareness of the risks associated with impaired judgment and predatory behaviour.

The second statement recounts a personal experience of inappropriate touching by a family member while the victim was asleep. It sheds light on the complex emotional aftermath, as the abuser was someone the victim trusted and held in high regard. This demonstrates the betrayal and confusion that can arise when abuse occurs within a trusted familial relationship, leading to long-lasting effects on the survivor's well-being.

These narratives serve as a reminder of the urgent need to protect children from all forms of abuse, whether they are conscious or vulnerable due to drugs or sleep. It highlights the importance of creating safe environments, promoting awareness, and providing support systems to help survivors heal from the trauma of abuse. Additionally, it emphasizes the significance of education and intervention programs to prevent such abuses and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

Abuse avoidance strategies

Just as perpetrators use a series of strategies to achieve their goal of harming children, children who have experienced abuse also employ a range of strategies to avoid or mitigate further harm. However, not all children may choose a specific strategy for avoiding abuse due to reasons such as fear, avoidance of violence, or protecting their dignity. In this context, a strategy is a tool through which survivors aim to achieve their goal of avoiding further abuse. Strategies focus on specific objectives and involve the allocation of resources and energy, demonstrating decisions or actions that are consistent, correct, or coherent, indicating the path children take to reach their goal. The strategies children choose may be effective or ineffective.

The most important strategies identified in this study, which children employed to defend themselves, included threatening the abuser, physical attacks, getting married, avoiding the abuser, dressing in different clothes or disguises, locking doors, escaping from home, shouting, and pleading for help. As

observed, these strategies are not always effective mechanisms for avoiding abuse and indicate the lack of awareness and capability among children. It can be said that the most effective techniques for children are reporting the abuse to official and non-official support networks and seeking their assistance. Non-official support networks include family members, relatives, acquaintances, and child advocates within non-governmental organizations. While it is true that in some cases, children may face abuse from individuals within these networks, there are still others who can provide support. Official networks refer to governmental support institutions such as welfare organizations, emergency social services, the social emergency hotline (123), and school counsellors.

Official and unofficial support networks in Iranian society encounter various obstacles and challenges in their efforts to assist children in breaking the cycle of abuse and putting an end to it. Informal support networks, including family, friends, and acquaintances, face limitations stemming from prevailing cultural stereotypes, which perceive disclosure of abuse as a source of dishonour. Additionally, there is a lack of effective communication and interaction due to generational value conflicts prevalent in contemporary Iranian society. This results in a lack of trust, transparency, and acknowledgment of abuse, thereby weakening the efficacy of informal support networks. Conversely, formal support networks face their own inefficiencies and ineffectiveness due to unfavourable economic and social conditions, low levels of social welfare, and inadequate supportive policies and services, particularly for vulnerable social groups such as children, the elderly, and women. Consequently, both official and unofficial support networks have proven inadequate as strategies to prevent child abuse.

Children are expected to play an active and intelligent role in employing strategies to avoid abuse. However, due to a lack of comprehensive education on the necessary skills or even just ordinary information, they are unable to effectively utilize these support networks. This highlights the shortcomings of the educational system and mass media, which have failed to provide families and children with the necessary knowledge

and tools to protect themselves against such dangers. Even when child support networks, such as their mothers, become aware of the abuse inflicted by their spouses or other family members, they may be constrained by a lack of awareness, economic dependence, vulnerability, and an inability to provide effective protection for the affected child.

The absence of sufficient education, awareness, and essential skills among children underscores the imperative of addressing the deficiencies within social institutions, including the family, school, and mass media. Understanding the structural and functional aspects of these institutions is crucial. The lack of maternal support for children subjected to sexual abuse by their fathers reflects broader issues pertaining to women's empowerment, gender discrimination, and societal divisions in contemporary Iran. It is evident that women lack the autonomy, courage, necessary skills, and adequate support to effectively safeguard children against sexual abuse perpetrated by men.

In light of the aforementioned circumstances, a detailed examination of each of these strategies is now presented.

Strategy of Threatening the Abuser for Disclosure of Sexual Abuse: The threat of disclosure is a prominent strategy employed to confront instances of sexual abuse. In some cases, children have used this strategy by threatening to expose the abuser. This approach is effective when the child is familiar with the abuser and has individuals in their surroundings who are also acquainted with the abuser. However, this strategy may not be applicable to abusers who are strangers and have only perpetrated abuse on the child once.

In this regard, Ms. B, a counsellor at a clinic and school, has stated:

The girl mentioned that whenever he touched her inappropriately, she felt helpless. But when she reached middle school, she mustered the strength to strike his hand with a clenched fist. She gained a newfound power and warned him that she would inform her

mother if he came close to her. She exhibited even greater courage.

Nahal, a 34-year-old individual who has studied psychology, shared:

The sexual abuse involved him exposing his genitalia to me or talking about it. He also wanted to hold me or make me sit on his lap, but as a child, I didn't like it. I would threaten and scream at him. I knew he was doing something wrong. I would threaten and scream at him, and then I would get up and leave. Once, he narrated a story to me, and I found it interesting. He showed me his genitalia multiple times. I wanted to share something funny with you so you could laugh. One time, I saw it in its normal state, and the next time, it was erect, so to speak. It was quite intriguing for me. I thought, 'Wow, how it has grown! How interesting!'

In the above account, we are confronted with the issue of sexual curiosity in children, as indicated by the statement at the end that it can be intriguing and may even signify amusement for the child. Considering the age at which sexual curiosity in children typically emerges, which is often around 3 years old, if not properly and timely addressed through education, even the slightest occurrence or conversation related to sexual matters can ignite larger and more intense sexual curiosities in the child or heightened curiosity specifically focused on their private parts. This can lead to an exploration of the sensitivity and arousal of these body parts and ultimately result in self-stimulation, even at a young age and prior to puberty, as mentioned by the individual themselves:

This incident marked the beginning of my sexual self-exploration in childhood and led me to discover self-pleasure, developing a dependence on self-stimulation from a young age.

If a person, especially a child, is restricted and suppressed by others who are responsible for guiding them or not properly directed, their mind begins to construct, process, and give meaning. However, if they are not guided along a direct path, they are labelled as deviant for the constructed path (such as self-stimulation) and are labelled deviant or abnormal by the very society that has shaped this process of meaning-making. Society never questions the process of expulsion and often those who are expelled become the subject of scrutiny by the society, and this is the essence of a power mechanism. Mrs. B utilized various techniques, one of which was the statement:

I had become a real dog in front of my uncle, truly a real dog. Then, for example, he would say in a gathering, 'Masoomeh is a very good girl, she is different from other girls, she likes to show off her wealth.' But I had truly become a real dog in front of her, I would wag my tail, he would never dare to come near me.

In this report, based on the individual's expression and literary style, we understand that they are pointing the finger of blame at themselves and still feel guilty. Even during the narration of the memory, with the intention of destruction, they speak ill of themselves and consider themselves responsible, not the abuser. Furthermore, these statements focus on the shattered self-esteem of the individual, which has been created due to the experience of childhood sexual abuse. Clearly, by likening themselves to a dog, they are disregarding their human dignity.

The aforementioned statements suggest that abused children frequently grapple with emotions such as guilt, shame, self-condemnation, and internal turmoil. The individual who has experienced abuse becomes entangled in a cycle of blame and guilt, becoming ensnared in ethical mechanisms. Over time, the experience of abuse becomes internalized within the individual, rather than solely originating from external sources (such as society). As a result, the position of the abused individual, who is initially considered a victim, shifts to that of the offender. The simultaneous feelings of disgust and

compassion towards the abusers, along with the fear and anger experienced by the abused child, create an irresolvable contradiction that leads to various disturbances within their being.

Physical attack strategy: Physical attack refers to hitting or causing harm to the abuser. In the above passage, it was mentioned that the abused individual attacked the abuser with their fists. Dr Maurice Stoudmann, a psychotherapist, has also stated:

When his uncle came, she said, 'I had so much pain that I grabbed my uncle's hand and it started bleeding, then his blood spilled on my pillow and blanket because it was dark and he apparently didn't see it. In the morning, when she woke up and saw what had happened, she told her mother that she had gotten her period,' even though she hadn't reached puberty yet.

In the above statements, the strategy of concealing and denying abuse is observed as a self-defence mechanism in the abused individual, stemming from their fear. As mentioned above, this fear also has its roots in feelings of guilt and wrongdoing that have been internalized within the individual under the influence of external circumstances. As a result, their position changes from being a victim to being the perpetrator.

Samaneh, a 35-year-old, has described her childhood experience as follows:

When I saw my uncle heading towards my sister, I thought to myself, 'He must be a paedophile and enjoys being with children.' I saw him approaching my sister, and that's when I started fighting back because before that, I didn't have the motivation to fight, to be honest. I think I could have fought back since I was 12, but I didn't have the drive. When I saw that my sister was about to get hurt, I saw him touching her, it's like that beast within me woke up, and I got scared. It felt like I was entering a war, and at one point, I grabbed a knife

and told him to be careful, not to come near you again, or else. He seemed scared too.

From the above statements, it can be inferred that defending others takes precedence over self-defence for the abused individual. This indicates that the abused individual has accepted themselves as both a victim and a wrongdoer internally and psychologically, leading them to internalize this perspective. Consequently, they do not make an effort to defend themselves but instead fight for others and to stop the abuse. In the two narrations above, the child's fight against abuse or the fight-or-flight response in the face of harm is evident as a physiological reaction. All animals demonstrate attack or escape responses as physiological reactions to perceived dangerous situations. This initial response was described by Walter Bradford Cannon. According to his theory, animals respond to threats with a set of secretions in the sympathetic nervous system, which is the main cause of their fight (combat) or flight (escape) behaviour. In the above reports, both children fought or confronted the abuser to protect themselves.

Marriage as a strategy for escaping or giving away a spouse: In some cases, children resort to marriage as a means to escape sexual abuse. Farnaz, who is currently 39 years old, said:

At what age did you get married?' 'I got married at the age of 12. Of course, I didn't give myself away. I thought the only way to escape from home was to get married. And once I got married, the [sexual abuse] stopped.

In this narrative, we are confronted with the choice of marrying as a strategy from the perspective of the abused individual. They see marriage as the only way to free themselves from the sexual abuse inflicted by their brother. It becomes their only solution to helplessness and vulnerability by seeking refuge in another household, without having sufficient knowledge of or even interest in the person they are marrying. The purpose of marriage is solely to escape their father's home or the place of

abuse. Here, marriage is not a romantic bond but rather a transformation of nature and function for the abused individual, serving as a mechanism of escape with the goal of stopping the abuse. Samaneh, who was subjected to abuse by her uncle, has narrated her experience:

Look, the marriage I entered into was mostly a wrong choice I made to escape from home. Because I had so little control over them, I would fight with them and wanted to get away from them. I made a choice that now, when I think about it, I wonder why I made that choice. And the choice I made, you know, all those things I thought it would be, it wasn't. Then this person gradually came towards me, and it was just like I allowed them to get close to me.

The presence of various emotional pressures increases the risk of mental disintegration, resulting in the individual's inability to display balanced and cohesive behaviour and maintain their mental well-being (Giovagnoli & Menssis, 2006). In an interview with Samaneh, when she talked about her marriage, she mentioned that years had passed since the occurrence of her sexual abuse experience. However, she expressed that her choice was a wrong person to escape from home, but beneath the reports, the excuse of escaping from home was less prominent. Behind her words, it was evident that she perceived marriage as a means to escape the memory of childhood sexual abuse. Leila, 38 years old, has stated:

The person who ruined my life and violated me in my childhood was a relative on my mother's side. Once, when he was doing this to me under my grandmother's staircase, my father discovered it by force, and he ran away. I was left to suffer the consequences. He always told me that I was a disgrace to the family until my adolescence, and I remember for my mother's wedding ceremony, he would say to me, 'You who took away our honour, I wish this ceremony would pass and end so I could escape from this torment, the disgrace of the

family, and that's how I was given to my abuser as a spouse.

The above statements indicate that the feeling of guilt and wrongdoing gradually infiltrates the wounded individual from external sources, such as family and society, and becomes internalized within their psyche. The parents, due to the individual's childhood sexual abuse, consistently viewed them as the culprit and wrongdoer, leading to a sense of shame and disgrace. Over time, this ingrained belief that they are responsible for the abuse inflicted upon them by another party becomes internalized, resulting in a sense of internal and mental guilt. This constructed guilt then manifests in actions, ultimately leading to the adoption of a strategy of forced marriage and escaping from home.

In reality, not only do family and society (as social institutions) not act as supporters or advocates for victims of sexual abuse in Iran, but they also exacerbate the consequences, dimensions, and repercussions of the abuse. They perpetuate the victim's constant association with the abuser and continuously reinforce the experience of abuse throughout their life. Analyses conducted thus far indicate that these social institutions, through their misconduct or dysfunction, contribute to the creation of mechanisms of abuse. Furthermore, even after the occurrence of abuse, this social context plays a role in the continuation or exacerbation of its destructive consequences in another situation.

In Leila's narrative, we encounter a situation where the strategy of giving her hand in marriage is employed by her parents, a choice that was not the individual's own. However, Leila's situation, due to the disclosure of the incident of assault in public by her father, carries even more severe implications. Leila's father chooses to give her hand in marriage, not to another person, but to the abuser himself. In this report, we are confronted with the most complex form of sexual abuse, where the victim is forced to live alongside the abuser for years, contrary to psychological recommendations and scientific principles that suggest it is better for sexual abuse victims not

to face their abusers directly to prevent the rekindling of traumatic memories.

In another case, a child who runs away from home due to sexual abuse and lacks a support system is brought to a marriage with an older man by the welfare system. The psychologist from the Yarigaran Pouyan Institute of Darvazeh Ghar stated the following about this:

The child's foster mother said that the deceased (referring to the child's father) had no problem, and the problem lies with the mirror he holds up to the father. I remember when the child was expelled from school, they escaped from home. The child was taken by the welfare system and transferred from Mashhad to Tehran's welfare system. Later, when they were handed over to the foundation, they were 19 years old, and they were given to a man who was 50 years old. They hadn't married before, and they were given to him, and the story was concluded, bringing the matter to a close. They married someone who was 31 years older than them.

Here, a sexually abused child escapes from the situation of abuse. Since the abusive situation is within the individual's home, social pressure causes the family to resort to the strategy of arranging a marriage for the escaped girl. This is mainly done to preserve the family's honour and reputation, as well as to avoid backlash from the community for supporting their child in such cases. We encounter such incidents more frequently in families where their daughters are more restricted and confined.

These experiences indicate that due to structural and functional issues within the social institutions and support systems in Iranian society, such as the family institution, welfare institutions, and other organizations, the sexual abuse of children is not treated, prevented, or mitigated. Instead, it is exacerbated through various societal policies at different levels and through scheduled programs that inadvertently create a

breeding ground for other social issues and harms, such as girls running away from home and forced marriages.

Regarding another case, Mrs. P said:

Later, I know she got married, and her marriage was like this: She became friends with a person and slept with him in the car, and she lost her virginity. She was very disturbed, very... because she thought that person did this because he loved her so much, but he hurt her and then abandoned her. She thought she would receive support from that person, but he was not interested in these stories at all. Later, I know she got married, and I am aware of it. She is living with a boy from Ahvaz now. When I asked her if she chose this herself, she said there was no other way, and since he supported her, she said it was the best option she could choose.

In the above narrative, we are faced with a strategy of arranged marriage, which also involves the choice of the abused individual. However, the choice is made out of compulsion, not out of love, affection, or proper understanding. Marriage becomes a refuge for all her helplessness. Experience has shown that when individuals who have been abused receive emotional and psychological support from their family, friends, or even counsellors or psychologists in such situations, they are less inclined to make inappropriate marriage choices.

Strategy of Avoidance: The strategy of avoidance refers to the physical distancing from the abuser. In these cases, children try to protect themselves by creating distance between themselves and the abuser. A 21-year-old woman, who is currently a social work student, said:

I used to escape intensely, even walking around the corners of the house without going into the middle. I don't know why I would choose the corners, but I remember running quickly. I tried not to be alone with him in an empty room. If I had to sit next to him, I would avoid doing so, even in front of others. The

thought of him touching my leg made me feel sick. I constantly tried to keep my distance from him. Whenever he reached out his hand to me, I resisted and tried not to let it happen. But due to societal pressure and the expectations of others, I was told that I had to comply. However, when we were alone, those expectations didn't exist.

Mrs. P said about this matter:

My friend had a boyfriend, and her boyfriend's mother had a relationship with him, which involved inappropriate touching but no sexual intercourse. When she moved out of that house, she had introduced herself to the welfare organization, but what actually happened was that her sister was also subjected to abuse.

In the above narratives, there is a reference to the fight-or-flight response in the face of abuse, where the individual utilizes escape techniques to protect themselves from the abuser.

Strategy of Self-Covering

Children who have experienced abuse have attempted to protect themselves from the abuser and their abuses by wearing more clothing or fully covering themselves while sleeping. One of the reasons children may employ this strategy is societal norms or judgments from others, as they have been told that exposing certain parts of their body may provoke the abuser. Therefore, it is better for them to fully cover themselves to avoid provoking others and being subjected to assault and violation. Dr Setudegan, a psychotherapist, has reported a case:

[...] I would leave the door open every night, and my uncle would sleep in the room with my brother, and my father and I would sleep in the same room or the living room, and my sister, mother, and aunt would sleep in

the same room. Throughout this time, I would wrap the blanket around myself like a sandwich and didn't want anyone to touch me. My mother and aunt were in deep sleep, and then he would come to me. My mother would hit me and ask why I was wrapping the blanket like that. I didn't want to tell her why. I said the blanket would get damaged and torn.

Another interviewee, who is currently 25 years old, said:

I wouldn't wear tight or revealing clothes anymore. I was very cautious. I covered myself up a lot in front of my brother. I was afraid of being seen, so I would adjust my clothing. I was afraid of it happening.

Mrs. B said:

Because I couldn't discuss this issue with my family due to the atmosphere at home, with all the illness and everything, I couldn't bring it up. There were three reasons: I didn't give myself to him, meaning I didn't respond to his greetings at all, and I kept my clothing in front of him. I tried to always maintain my coverage.

According to Sigmund Freud, defence mechanisms are psychological strategies that operate unconsciously to protect individuals from anxiety caused by unacceptable thoughts or feelings. These defence mechanisms are employed as a means of self-preservation in the face of perceived threats to our emotional well-being. In the cases mentioned above, it can be inferred that these individuals have utilized defence mechanisms to create a safeguard against anxiety and guilt.

One such defence mechanism is rationalization, which involves distorting cognitive perceptions of 'facts' to create a less threatening narrative or motivation. When faced with challenging circumstances, individuals may construct logical justifications for the events they experience. For example, the fear of being seen may lead someone to adjust their clothing,

despite no actual harm occurring. Similarly, wrapping oneself tightly in a blanket like a sandwich can be seen as a way to establish boundaries and protect against unwanted touch.

From Freud's psychological perspective, these acts of self-covering can be analysed as defence mechanisms employed to shield oneself from harm and to cope with distressing experiences. However, when examining the sociocultural context, particularly in Iranian society, which is deeply influenced by religious discourse, the practice of covering oneself takes on additional significance. Covering is often regarded as a means of protection, care, and safeguarding against sin. These cultural norms and religious teachings shape the internalized beliefs and behaviours of individuals, especially children who are in the process of socialization and development.

The internalization of these norms serves as a mechanism to prevent harm or, in some cases, to rationalize and justify it. The dominant religious discourse in Iranian society permeates various aspects of social structure and systems, lending legitimacy to the idea of covering oneself as a form of moral responsibility. Consequently, individuals draw upon these internalized norms to navigate social situations and protect themselves from potential harm.

However, it is important to recognize that the act of covering and concealing can also have unintended consequences. While intended as a form of suppression and protection, it may inadvertently invoke curiosity, fascination, or even arousal. Historical experiences of societies have demonstrated the complexities and contradictions associated with the practice of self-covering, highlighting the multifaceted nature of its impact.

Thus, the strategy of self-covering can be understood through both psychological and sociocultural lenses. From a psychological standpoint, it can be seen as a defence mechanism aimed at protecting oneself from anxiety and guilt. Simultaneously, within the sociocultural context, self-covering is influenced by religious teachings and societal norms that emphasize modesty and protection from sin. However, the act

of covering oneself is not without its complexities and potential unintended consequences, as historical experiences have shown.

Escape from home: One of the ineffective strategies employed by children when experiencing abuse, especially sexual abuse, is escaping from home. This phenomenon is prevalent among children, who believe that not only are they not supported by their families but they may also be blamed and subjected to physical and psychological abuse. In some cases, the act of escaping has irreparable consequences, as they may face multiple challenges and be exposed to dangerous environments, resulting in further harm. Mrs. A, an employee of an organization, stated:

Yeah, one of the beneficiaries here had a father who divorced her mother and remarried his cousin.

Whenever she tried to tell her cousin that her father was doing this, her cousin didn't believe her. They argued that she was deeply in love with her father, and for years, she suffered from her father's and brothers' harassment. Eventually, she escaped and came to Tehran, where she ended up becoming a prostitute. She told me that when she was there, she was with only one or two specific people, but here, she has been with numerous strangers.

It is evident that when a sexually abused individual does not receive support from their family and society, they are forced to engage in actions that contribute to social issues and damage within that community. One of these actions is escaping from home, which, while exacerbating the issue of girls running away from home, also leads to the perpetuation of vulnerability. Therefore, we can consider child sexual abuse as a central issue or harm that, if a society like Iran does not devise appropriate policies and measures for prevention and mitigation, will serve as a breeding ground for the creation and intensification of other social problems and harms, deepening societal underdevelopment.

Mrs. Kanaani, who experienced abuse in childhood, said:

I escaped from home; I mean, I ran away after the assault. Yeah, I told my brother because my mother wanted to give me away to her husband. I had many suitors, and she wanted to give me to one of her university colleagues. So, you ran away after your mother gave you to your husband? Yeah, when he found out, he had a stroke, like realizing that my brother did this to me.

Mrs. M., a social activist, said:

She escaped from her uncle's house, and I don't know what they did to her and how many times I tried to contact her uncle and father, but they didn't respond. This is the fate of these children.

Here, the strategy of escaping from home, similar to evading the abuser, acts as a response of fight-or-flight against the harm. In the above accounts, individuals have resorted to the flight response by escaping from the abusive situation to protect themselves from further incidents and the consequences of sexual abuse.

Strategy of Locking the Door: This strategy is mostly applicable during instances of violence. When a child realizes that the abuser, who in these cases is often a relative, intends to harm them, they lock the door in a place where they can keep themselves away from the abuser and defend themselves against the abuse. Mrs. Social Worker from Naser Khosrow Children's Home said:

For example, there was a girl I encountered when I was interning. I was surprised to see her there and when I talked to her, her name was Zahra. I asked her why she was there. She said her father hadn't assaulted her, but he had intentions to do so. I was so ashamed that when my mother wanted to buy vegetables, she would take me with her, and when I wanted to sleep, I would lock

the bedroom door. It was so unsafe, and her mother concluded that she should come to the welfare centre and stay there to live. There was a girl there, for example, and we had to fill out some forms. Then her father was addicted.

Mrs. Mime, a psychologist, said:

There was a case where a lady came to the clinic for counselling. She was very anxious and said that she had been sexually assaulted by her uncle. The next time he tried to assault her, she locked herself in the bathroom and screamed. She said she didn't have any support, and she couldn't file a complaint because it would tarnish our reputation. Unfortunately, they don't follow up on such cases, and eventually, they reach a breaking point and self-destruct. The society itself doesn't provide a proper way for them to defend themselves. They don't have anything to prove their claims. They can't go to legal authorities.

Regarding the strategy of locking the door, it is a defensive response employed by victims to create a physical barrier between themselves and the abuser. While it may provide temporary protection, this strategy is not a long-term solution. It highlights the urgent need for effective support systems, legal measures, and societal awareness to address and prevent sexual abuse, ensuring the safety and well-being of individuals who experience such trauma.

Strategy of Screaming: One of the strategies that is relatively effective and can deter the perpetrator from harming the victim is screaming. This strategy alerts other people and encourages them to intervene. However, this strategy is only effective when there are individuals nearby who are willing and able to intervene. Mrs. Mime, the psychologist, has also stated:

For instance, five years ago, my stepfather and his son sexually assaulted me at night. It wasn't just sexual

assault; they wanted to silence me by threatening and intimidating me.

A 36-year-old woman who studied architecture shared her experience:

I remember the incident when my brother lifted my dress and grabbed my wrists, and he hit my chest. I couldn't reach my father, and I screamed loudly. It was the most horrifying thing that could happen. My sister thought they were joking with me. They were laughing, and I was being humiliated. I screamed and shouted to free myself from my father's control, and my mother witnessed the scene, but she did nothing and looked at me as if I were asking for help. She didn't take any action.

In the above accounts, the victim simultaneously experiences several negative emotions, including feelings of humiliation, being mocked, the indifference of the mother, and most importantly, feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that can lead to a decrease in self-esteem and self-confidence in their future life stages. Furthermore, the weakening of social capital, such as security, trust, and empathy in their social environment, can also be observed because the significant individuals in their life, such as the mother, sister, and father, have failed to provide security, trust, and empathy.

Another individual who has experienced abuse mentioned:

I was harassed by a stranger on my way to school, and he made aggressive advances towards me. I screamed, and a neighbour arrived and intervened.'

The strategy of screaming can be an effective immediate response to alert others and seek help in situations of abuse or danger. It serves as a way to draw attention to the situation and potentially deter the perpetrator. However, it is crucial to recognize that this strategy may not always be feasible or result in immediate assistance. It highlights the need for

comprehensive support systems, awareness programs, and a society that takes proactive measures to protect individuals from abuse and ensure their safety.

Strategy of Pleading and Begging: This strategy primarily occurs during instances of sexual abuse, when the perpetrator intends to harm the victim and is in close proximity or actively engaging in abuse. This strategy reflects the helplessness and vulnerability of a child who, in the absence of proper self-defence education and effective support networks, can only resort to pleading with the abuser, which is generally not an effective strategy for self-defence. Shida, who experienced abuse as a child, shares:

At first, I begged him a lot and cried, asking him not to do this, but it didn't work. Because I realized it wouldn't harm me, and it seemed like I had gotten used to it, but I didn't like it. For example, if I were in a specific situation, I would be willing to go along with it.

Farnaz, a 39-year-old, said:

Yeah, at that time he was about ten years older, and there was a significant age difference between us. He shouldn't have done that, and no matter what I said, he wouldn't listen. He had his own addictions.'

Ultimately, Mrs. B resorted to reciting the Quran as a way to distance herself from the abusive uncle, saying:

No, I couldn't scream; I was shocked, completely shocked. Then I have a strong belief in Ayat al-Kursi, so I started reciting it, and my uncle left. This incident happened to me.'

Through the strategy of pleading, a child believes they can convince the other person and appeal to their mercy in order to potentially prevent further abusive behaviour. This strategy can intensify and reinforce feelings of humiliation, worthlessness, helplessness, and powerlessness in the victim.

Secrecy in the face of other actions: An important question in this regard is why some children choose secrecy instead of reporting abuse to others or anyone who can support them? Studies conducted in this field indicate that abused individuals and even witnesses of abuse do not disclose it for reasons such as feeling shame, denial, downplaying the abuse, fear of consequences, low self-confidence, lack of awareness, lack of resources and power, feelings of helplessness and despair, societal norms and patriarchal structures, lack of security, and more. Reporting sexual abuse to others is necessary, but the fear and shame of how others will react have always been barriers to disclosure. The concept of secrecy in the face of judgment and reaction from others demonstrates how children's fear of judgment and reaction from others has influenced the extent of non-disclosure of sexual abuse.

This study explores various factors that contribute to the prediction of disclosure, including fear of judgment and reputation, family reactions, rejection, loss of family support, punishment, lack of belief and support, violence, expulsion from school, oppressive school atmosphere, perpetrator threat, shame and embarrassment, lack of awareness, inappropriate family relationships, lack of support networks, masculine pride, forgetting the abuse, self-blame, guilt, lack of courage, and turbulent family conditions. It is important to note that these factors often intersect and are not mutually exclusive. For instance, a child may choose not to report the abuse due to a combination of guilt, fear of the perpetrator's threats, and concerns about others' reactions.

In this study, various factors such as fear of judgment and reputation (preserving one's own and family's reputation), fear of family reactions, fear of rejection, fear of losing family support (the perpetrator), fear of punishment, fear of disbelief and lack of support from the family, fear of violence, fear of expulsion from school, the oppressive atmosphere of school, the threat of the perpetrator, feelings of shame and embarrassment, lack of awareness, inappropriate family relationships and lack of support networks, masculine pride, forgetting the abuse, self-blame, feelings of guilt, lack of courage, and the turbulent conditions within the family during

the abuse for predicting disclosure have been examined. In the following section, each of these factors will be discussed. It is important to note that many of these factors are interconnected and not mutually exclusive. For example, a child may not report the abuse due to feelings of guilt, fear of the perpetrator's threats, and fear of others' reactions.

Fear of judgment and reputation preservation: In many cases, victims of abuse in their childhood do not report the abuse out of fear that it would tarnish their own and their family's reputation. They are constantly afraid of receiving negative labels. For instance, when a child is subjected to abuse by a close relative, they may fear that reporting it to others would lead to their family being criticized and rumours being spread about them. In such circumstances, disclosing the abuse not only fails to help the victim but also causes them further harm. Reputation matters in social interactions, and as long as others are not aware, it may not carry significant importance. However, when an individual or their family's reputation is compromised within the community, they face both social consequences and deprivation of many social benefits. For example, victims of abuse may be blamed and chastised, or they may be viewed as promiscuous and lacking in morals. In some cases, families may even force victims into marrying the abuser as a way to restore their lost reputation.

These factors demonstrate that three prominent emotions contribute to the secrecy of abuse: the feeling of guilt, the fear encompassing dimensions such as fear of social disapproval, which often entails punishment and social deprivation; fear of being labelled; fear of being chastised and rumours being spread, and the feeling of shame. Each of these emotions has various dimensions. Subconsciously, individuals register the consequences of disclosing sexual abuse, including punishment, deprivation, labelling, chastisement, and the spread of rumours. All these consequences indicate that the victim of abuse is more likely to be seen as the perpetrator and guilty party rather than a victim by their family and society. Sexual abuse ultimately leads to defensive responses of denial and secrecy in the victim.

Goffman's theoretical framework can help explain this concept. The experience of abuse is a burning shame, and if it is revealed or exposed, the victim and their surroundings, including their family, become targets. Therefore, victims of abuse try to prevent their shame from becoming apparent and manage it in some way. The exposure of shame is equivalent to being rejected by society through formal and informal punishments.

However, in this context, informal punishments play a more significant role, and members of the community punish the perpetrator and their surroundings through rumours and talking behind their back. Informal punishments are more important because they are carried out by the general public and a wide range of individuals who, through various means, react against the person in different situations and at any time. Even in the absence of people and when the person is alone, these types of punishments exert pressure on them through their own conscience because the norms and judgments of others have become internalized within the individual, and the attitudes that others have towards them and their behaviour have become part of their beliefs. Therefore, the power of informal punishments goes beyond formal punishments. Regarding the fear of losing reputation as a predictor, Dr Abhariyan, a university professor, has stated:

One is the issue of reputation, and the other is the issue of fear. I had a patient who had a specialist doctor as a father, and I asked why he didn't speak up. He said that before this happened, we used to watch movies, and my dad would say that there is no point anymore and their life is ruined. He said that when this happened, he didn't tell anyone, even his sister's friend who had regular interactions with him. In his other examples, he said it would be even worse if it was his own daughter. It's the fear of losing reputation and that social stigma [...]. These are issues that people don't talk about; they are taboo. It's a situation where the blame is shifted towards you, even though you have been harmed.

The above statements indicate that because the individual who has experienced sexual abuse is aware that they do not hold a social position in the mindset of society (family and community), they take the initiative to hide or deny the abuse in order to prevent punishment and rejection from them. In other words, abuse, in the public consciousness, is associated with sin, guilt, immoral actions, crime, disgrace, and so on, and its consequences and repercussions involve punishment and rejection from family and society. To prevent these consequences, the victim of abuse resorts to denial and concealment as their course of action. The position of the abused individual shifts from being a victim to being blamed and seen as the culprit and criminal, and support is replaced by condemnation, punishment, and rejection.

Ms. K, an active women's rights advocate, has stated:

Because they fear the spilling of shame. The fear that they won't be able to confront the perpetrator in a way that would even subject them to abuse and harassment. So, they don't receive permission from their mothers, sisters, and other loved ones who could support them and have this conversation with them. Instead, they are seen as guilty by them, which causes the victimized individual to be perceived as the culprit and remain silent. This silence becomes a platform for the continuation of the unethical behaviour, whether it comes from the perpetrator, a relative, or any other person within the family.

The above statements indicate that in reality, abuse is not perceived as an action, phenomenon, or reality by the family and society to be examined and addressed in its various and diverse dimensions. The prevailing ethical and cultural discourse on non-consensual sexual relationships is so dominant that it does not allow for a logical and reasoned examination of the phenomenon of sexual abuse and its dimensions. This dominant ethical discourse legitimizes abuse as a form of disgrace, the victim as the perpetrator and sinner,

and ultimately justifies their expulsion, condemnation, and punishment.

Ms. M, a psychologist working in the outskirts of Sanandaj, has stated:

She said, 'I have no support, so I can't complain. And even if I do complain, our honour will be lost. Unfortunately, they don't follow up, and suddenly things escalate to the point of explosion, and they destroy themselves. Society doesn't even provide a proper path for them to defend themselves. They have nothing to prove their case. And well, I said one of them is our honour. What happens if you reveal it later? It's only your own honour. Besides, even if you can get married now, you won't be able to later because your honour will be gone, and even your own family won't support you. Having support is crucial. If your parents are behind you in such circumstances, no one can harm you. They can't say you've been violated but I am strong. They become sick from the fact that their boundaries have been violated. Maybe they can gain false power later, but when they look back at their past, they're wounded and unable to heal.

One of the abused individuals, in response to the question 'What prevented you from disclosing the abuse?' answered:

Preserving my own and my family's honour.

Ms. Ismaili, a painting instructor in non-governmental organizations, said:

Last year, in the entrance of a Hosseiniyeh cave, it seems like a man dressed as a clergyman was establishing something and inviting teenage boys there for religious courses. He even took the kids to the swimming pool and even on a trip to Mashhad. After

this trip, some of these kids came to Ms. Esmaeili and reported that this man repeatedly subjected different boys to sexual abuse. But they don't speak up because they don't want to be mocked and lose their honour.

The above statements indicate that in terms of gender, one of the factors that prevents the disclosure of abuse, in addition to the issue of honour, is the fear of being ridiculed by others. This factor can only be inhibitory for men and is related to the discussion of gender as a factor and barrier to disclosure.

Ms. J, a resident of Shahrekord who was sexually assaulted by her stepbrother, said:

I can't express such things in my family or even in the community because of strong prejudices. There could be conflicts, killings, and such, and I didn't try to make a big deal out of it because when it happened, I couldn't defend myself at that young age because I didn't understand. But even when I got older, I couldn't speak up due to cultural circumstances. The fear of confrontation, fear of dishonour, and fear of losing the sense of innocence were so strong that when my stepbrothers found out about my relationship with this boy and read our messages, he himself unfortunately abused me while I was in a completely lifeless state and felt nothing. I couldn't tell my family because I didn't feel anything, but I remained like a statue.

Shame and embarrassment have also been another factor in keeping it a secret. A 25-year-old woman who was sexually touched by her brother said:

Well, because I was ashamed, I couldn't say it. That's why I didn't tell anyone.

Ms. B, the psychologist, has stated:

Now, what about Afghan children who are child labourers, and the investigations they conducted

themselves through their interactions with the children in that neighbourhood? Their reports indicate that because they are living in a crowded house, a courtyard house where they live room by room, and most of them are victims of abuse, they still don't inform their families due to shame and fear of the older ones.



Figure 29 Distribution of respondents by factors affecting secrecy

The feeling of shame also takes on meaning in relation to others. Shame and embarrassment stem from concerns about how they will be judged later and how others will react. Fear is another source of secrecy. The reasons for children’s fear are

varied. Some major reasons include family reactions, being expelled, fear of losing family or support, punishment, disbelief from others, expulsion from school, and threats from the abuser. Children are afraid that when their families become aware of the issue of sexual abuse, they will be expelled or punished in different ways. In many cases, the abuser is the child's father, mother, or other family members. The fear of losing them or being punished by them prevents the child from reporting the abuse. Sometimes children are afraid that after reporting the violence, their family or other support networks will not believe their words, causing them to distrust them in a way. A 21-year-old woman who is currently studying social work said:

Due to certain family problems that existed, my mother and I had some distance between us. Because of my father's addiction and other problems, I never had a good emotional connection with my mother; it still exists, and I'm working on it. There was no good emotional connection, and I didn't even know what reaction my mother would show if I talked to her about it. For example, she might say it's inappropriate for your age to talk about these things or ask why I'm saying these things, accusing me of lying. I was very afraid that this would turn into an argument at some point.

A woman from the House of the Sun office described the experience of one of their clients as follows:

I remember a case where even the parents were aware that the brother was abusing the sister, but they tried to normalize the situation and even accused the girl of having mental issues and lying because they didn't accept any solution and had taken the boy's side.

The above statements indicate that when families are ignorant and lack education, they tend to deny the abuse and employ denial as a defence mechanism. In order to justify and dismiss

the issue of sexual abuse, the family may label the victim as a liar, insane, or mentally unstable, effectively portraying them as someone unreliable or untrustworthy. In other words, the power mechanism that the family employs regarding the victim is achieved through othering and portraying them as crazy. This dichotomous categorization and othering lead to punishment and condemnation instead of integration and support for the abused individual.

In fact, families and communities use three common power mechanisms in relation to child sexual abuse: denial, dismissal, and justification. The narratives above demonstrate that the family environment, characterized by turbulent and fractured relationships between parents and other family members, lack of emotional bonds, inappropriate reactions from parents, absence of supportive sources, and fear of punishment, causes the abused individual to remain silent and not report the abuse. One case involved abuse by the grandfather and the neighbourhood supermarket owner, and the other case involved abuse by a brother. It can be said that these types of families, to some extent, provide a breeding ground for abuse, and after the abuse, due to the authoritative atmosphere they create, the child is unable to report the abuse and receive support from them.

Here, we are not dealing with a cause-and-effect relationship, but rather with a chaotic system in which both the structure and its components, as well as the relationship between the components, are severely disrupted. After experiencing abuse by the supermarket owner in her childhood, a social worker described the reason for keeping it a secret as follows:

This was an incident of assault that happened to me, but I didn't tell anyone, not even my family. I knew that if I spoke up, I would be in conflict, and well, I didn't want this to happen at that gathering.

In the above quote, it is evident that both enduring mechanisms, such as the family's reaction, and situational factors, such as being at a gathering, have led her to not report the experience of abuse. Additionally, a 33-year-old woman

who was assaulted by a taxi driver in her childhood explained the reason for keeping it a secret as follows:

Why didn't you tell your family? I was never someone who spoke up. Oh, you weren't close to them? Yeah, I just wasn't someone who spoke up. Or were you afraid of their reaction? I do not say. I avoid talking about issues in general.

The above passage illustrates that there is a lack of trust, honesty, and empathy in the family relationship. It suggests that social capital has been weakened both within the family structure and in society as a whole. Furthermore, strong denial mechanisms operate within the family and society because the space for dialogue is limited and faces challenges, including a lack of conversational skills and receptiveness to criticism. The individuals involved have not learned the skills of seeking support from their social networks, and even when they have experienced abuse, they blame themselves:

I thought maybe I had done something that made it happen this way. I thought maybe I had made a move. Yes, I always had doubts about myself. I don't know why.

The reason for keeping the secret of the abuse, according to a former teacher who worked at the Shoush Children's Home, is expressed as follows:

They fear being expelled and having nowhere to go within the family. I remember back then, when we had girls coming out of the house, they had nowhere to go but welfare.

A teacher at the school, Sadeghian, said:

One can fear the person who committed the act, and then fear the family's reaction. For example, when they make a mistake, the family responds aggressively. They don't pay attention and don't believe that the child feels

guilty and thinks they will be punished, and that the blame lies with them. They have that sense of guilt.

A social worker from the Athena Charity Institute has articulated the issue of fear as follows in response to the question, 'How long does it take for the victim to disclose the incident?':

After enduring a lot of damage, they come forward or are referred. The reason they don't disclose is a lack of awareness of support networks and fear of being judged. They fear the perpetrator because usually it is a family member who has threatened the victim in various ways, and the victim doesn't disclose it to preserve their honour, fear of losing their family, fear of judgment, and lack of awareness of support networks.

The above statements indicate that awareness of support networks regarding reporting sexual abuse is weak in Iranian society. This suggests that responsible institutions for information and awareness have been ineffective in promoting these supportive networks, or their transparency is weak due to the presence of denial mechanisms. In this regard, a critical analysis of mass media and communication channels is necessary.

The director of the Neurology Clinic stated:

Look, they are different. Some people in their childhood talk to someone, get punished, or get encouraged. For example, someone consulted with their older brother and said, 'I'm going through the same thing, but I remained silent.' Others, however, didn't speak for years until they talked to me. There are various reasons why they didn't tell their parents. It could be because they still love their brother, their father, and mother, or it could be out of fear or the fear of disclosure, which

would harm their honour. I had a dear little child who went and said it in a group, and they punished him. And one last thing that I don't have many of is mirrors. They say, 'But your mother is not behind you,' and they say, 'No, it's your uncle, it's your father.'

Mrs. Zohreh, a social activist, said:

Fear, fear. They kept saying it so much that no one should know. I understand that when the light went on and off, it shook. They knew it was a private moment. The description they gave him is a fear they instilled in him.

Mrs. Ghobadi, the school principal, said:

For example, the fear of honour and the fear of being expelled by their own family. Or simply not believing. That's also a reason. Because I heard her say to her mother, 'Why are you saying such things about your brother-in-law and others?' They didn't accept it and said it's better if I don't say anything.

Sheida also mentioned fear of conflict and punishment as a reason for not disclosing. She had experienced the same thing with her brother before, which made fear deeply ingrained in her. Her account is as follows:

Once my brother and another boy of the same age went to do those things. My family found out, my father wanted to kill him, but my mother didn't let him. For a month, there was fighting in our house. No, I couldn't say anything. I told my brother what happened to me. If the family knew, there would be fighting and bloodshed. I didn't tell anyone out of fear of conflict and losing my honour.'

The secrecy of abused individuals in their beliefs and family dynamics is deeply rooted. Family beliefs that hinder the

disclosure of abuse include notions of honour, judgment, and blame. Family actions that prevent the disclosure of abuse by the victim include denial, punishment, expulsion, humiliation, ridicule, conflict, and tension.

Narges, a 36-year-old who experienced abuse from her uncle in childhood, said:

What prevented me? Fear. Fear of dishonour and causing bloodshed in the family.

Threats from the perpetrator are also one of the factors that contribute to the secrecy of child abuse. They threaten the child or other family members with physical violence or even murder, for example, they say that if the child reports it, they will kill their guardian or parents. In other cases, they threaten that the child's honour is at risk. All of these factors contribute to the child's reluctance to report the abuse to their support networks. Dr Abhariyan stated:

Another issue is the threats made by the abuser, for example, they say that if you report it to anyone, I will harm you. These are issues that are often left unspoken, they are taboos, and the blame is directed towards the victim, even though they are the ones who have been harmed.

Mrs. Rasouli, a social worker, describes the bullying behaviour of the perpetrator:

I've seen it most with brothers, and many times the mother is aware of it, but she doesn't take action because it's a taboo to bring it up outside the home. Sometimes they provide financial support, so they don't interfere. The brother is the bully, and they can't do anything to stop him from hurting the child.

The above accounts demonstrate that being a bully, exerting force and power, is accompanied by violence and threats. This mechanism prevents the disclosure of abuse by the victim. Additionally, the perception that the abused individual is to

blame and is at fault, along with the belief that has been ingrained in them, facilitates the actions of the abuser. As we mentioned in previous analyses, since the victim is not recognized as a victim, and this belief is internalized within them, it creates a suitable environment for the abuser to leverage their physical power and bullying.

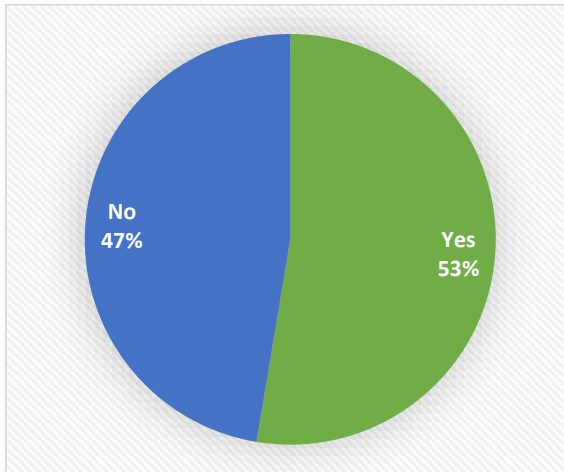


Figure 30 The experience of corporal punishment in childhood by adults

Fear of expulsion from school and the inappropriate school environment is another factor that contributes to non-disclosure. One of the abuse survivors said:

Fear of disgrace and expulsion from school.

Samaneh, a 33-year-old doctoral student of law who experienced abuse in childhood, mentioned the suffocating atmosphere of the school and the lack of benefit in reporting the abuse to support networks such as the school and school counsellors. She said:

What good would it do if I told someone? My father was absent, he wouldn't care, and I didn't have a brother. Even if I wanted to tell my mother, what would she do? I saw her getting beaten by my uncle.

Did I want to tell my mother to get beaten too? Besides, I wasn't even aware that the school had a counsellor. I was bullied at school. We didn't have the courage to tell the school authorities about what I had witnessed. I remember once I brought a book, maybe it was a pamphlet, to school, and I was expelled for three days. In a school where we weren't allowed to bring a simple fruit like a banana, how could I go and tell them about what happened?"

The school, as the second major institution in the socialization of children after the family, plays the most significant role in their social education and support. Unfortunately, it suffers from weaknesses and shortcomings that not only limit its functions to mere education but, as inferred from the above statements, raise doubts about its educational functions as well. Having a structured and cohesive system where a counsellor holds a special and professional position, and their selection is based on consistent principles and rules, contributes to the educational function of the school.

According to the accounts of children at school who face limitations and strict control, they do not feel safe and confident enough to disclose their sexual abuse. They prefer to deny it rather than face stigmatization, blame, punishment, and expulsion from this institution, which would further exacerbate the depth and severity of their issue.

In this context, an analysis of the school institution's deficiencies in Iranian society becomes necessary, considering the educational functions it should have for children and adolescents. The school, which should ideally be a place for teaching various skills, including sex education and ways to combat abuse, turns into a space of fear and intimidation in some Iranian schools, where abused children are unable to report their experiences to school counsellors. One of the reasons for their fear is the possibility of expulsion from school. It is known that girls who marry at a young age are highly likely to be expelled from school. The reason for expulsion is the fear that the principal or teachers have that other children might

learn such behaviours from the abused child. In this regard, Mr. Eftakhari, a school principal, provides interesting explanations about the perspectives of teachers and parents regarding sexually abused children:

Because this issue is deeply ingrained in our culture. People look at a child with suspicious eyes, as if the child themselves is the abuser or perpetrator. These kinds of judgments open up a whole new set of problems. I even had a case at school where things got worse as soon as I told my teacher to be careful. Instead of supporting me, the teacher's gaze turned against the child, as if the child was the aggressor, and the teacher started looking at them through the eyes of the abuser. The teacher even told me that they thought the child wanted this to happen to them. That was it for me. I went to the parents and told them to take the child out of that school. If changing schools is in their best interest, then so be it.

The above statements indicate that in Iran, the school, like the family and society, firmly holds the assumption that the sexually abused, whether children, teenagers, or students, are to blame and considered the wrongdoers, rather than victims of abuse. Therefore, instead of viewing abuse as a sin and wrongdoing, it is seen as the student's fault. As a result, the sexually abused student faces stigmatization and experiences mechanisms of expulsion, humiliation, and condemnation within the school system. Rather than being placed under the protective umbrella of societal support and social institutions as a victim, there is alignment between the main society and social institutions, including the family and school, in regarding the sexually abused as the guilty and criminal party.

Gender also influences the lack of reporting or the reasons behind it. Boys, compared to girls, feel more hesitant to report abuse because they believe it contradicts their masculine pride. This masculine pride is ingrained by a male-dominated society, which expects men to be strong and never allow such abuses to

happen, as if it is always men who should be in the position of the abuser or perpetrator, and not the abused. Mr. Hamed said:

What do you think prevents us from speaking up to adults and others?

Is it pride or fear of judgment by others?

Not just pride.

Another survivor has expressed:

Honestly, apart from the shame and embarrassment that came along with it, I felt like it should remain hidden because it would affect my masculinity, pride, and everything about me. It's like questioning yourself. If you came forward and confessed, you always had this fear of facing people and taking all the blame upon yourself for not taking care of yourself, questioning your identity as a boy or a man, and undermining your pride and character. By engaging in this self-disclosure, you would expose yourself.

The above statements from a male survivor indicate that prevalent gender norms and stereotypes in Iranian society emphasize the intertwining of power and masculinity, or pride and masculinity within the male gender identity, starting from childhood and throughout the process of social acceptance and socialization. Their minds are constructed based on these societal beliefs and continue to be influenced by them. This connection and impact demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society. The power of this constructed mindset is such that even when a person finds themselves in the position of a sexually abused individual, due to the beliefs they hold about their gender and masculinity, they refrain from disclosing the abuse, considering it as a threat to those beliefs, and therefore deny or conceal it. Hence, gender and prevalent stereotypes associated with it are another factor, alongside other mentioned factors, that place the

survivor as the guilty and wrongdoer rather than the victim of abuse.

Lack of awareness is another reason for not reporting abuse. The lack of awareness about the importance of reporting abuse directly stems from the lack of education. When this issue is not addressed in the educational system and sex education is not provided to children, it is natural that many children cannot report their abuse to formal and informal support networks. Families, too, are unable to educate their children in this regard due to the lack of educational resources. Therefore, alongside other factors, the lack of awareness of how to report the experience of abuse and to whom it should be reported also leads to children not reporting it. In this regard, Ms. H stated:

After enduring a lot of damage, they come for help or are referred. The reason for not disclosing is the lack of awareness about support networks and the fear of being judged. The fear of the perpetrator, who is usually a family member, has threatened the victim in various ways, and the victim does not disclose it in order to preserve honour, fear of losing the family, being judged, and the lack of awareness of support networks.

Ms. Kh stated:

I had a child from a small town, and I realized that it was child abuse. I told my father and brother, whom I loved very much. Then, in the afternoons, they took me and openly talked about it. I mean, the lack of awareness of this issue is severe in many of our relatives and towns.

Amir stated:

Their opinion was that in those circumstances, I went to the police twice and told them that a man was harassing me. The police told me to go tell my father, but I couldn't because I didn't know how he would

react. But another issue for me at that time was that I didn't know where to go and report it. No one had told me whom and where I should report these matters. Which organization or institution could I tell this to and seek help?

Some individuals who have experienced abuse mentioned the lack of support or support networks as a reason for not reporting the abuse. There are several reasons why abused individuals may not have had a primary supporter. Sometimes, the child has been living with only their father, who has been the perpetrator of the abuse. Since there hasn't been anyone else in the child's family environment, and the child has had no other place to live, they have been forced to live with their father and not report the abuse to anyone. In other cases, the mother and other family members have been aware of the abuse, but due to the perpetrator's economic control over the family and the family's fear of being abandoned, they have not intervened effectively. Another reason is the lack of a proper relationship between the abused individual and other family members. When this relationship is absent, the abused individual believes that reporting the abuse will not result in effective support from them. In general, the dependency of the abused individual and their family members on the perpetrator often prevents disclosure of the abuse and confrontation with the abuser.

This dependency can exist both in material aspects, such as livelihood and place of residence, and in non-material aspects, such as emotional and psychological dependence. On the other hand, the lack of intimate relationships among family members, which undermines the abused individual's trust and sense of security, acts as a barrier to communication and disclosure of the abuse. In a society like Iran, support institutions and organizations do not provide strong support for victims of abuse due to developmental and cultural challenges. Therefore, they cannot adequately replace the lack of support from the family or address the issue of dependency mentioned. In this section, several quotes in this regard are discussed. The clinic director and therapist stated:

The child accepted it because their home was a safe place, and they had no one else. Their mother was not there to tell. It was their father and the child.

Ms. K, a social worker, stated:

When one of the girls told her mother, she denied the issue. Although she herself had realized the problem, she didn't know what to do or where to seek support. The non-biological father plays the role of breadwinner, and if separation occurs, what will happen to the shelter and breadwinner? So, the mother remains silent in the face of this incident. But the children received support from the institution, yet they still didn't have a safe environment because after classes and receiving support, they had to return home and face the same abuser, who was their stepfather.

Samaneh, a doctoral student in law, said:

There was no one I could go to and tell. No one I could trust and understand. It was mostly a wound, and now when I think about it, there was no trustworthy person or space for me to go and talk. There was no security provided for me to say that something better will happen afterward.

A 33-year-old social worker shared her experience, saying:

For me, talking about what happened and bringing back those painful memories was incredibly difficult. What's even more painful is that telling it to anyone, whether a stranger or someone familiar, wouldn't make a difference. They wouldn't understand this pain or truly comprehend it. So, it's better for me to bury this incident within myself, and for years, the secret remained. But it was a painful and impactful secret.

A 21-year-old woman who is currently studying social work said:

The main reason was that my mother and I were emotionally distant from each other. I felt that if I brought up this sexual incident because there were times when a question would arise for me or my sister, she would say it's not appropriate for your age. I thought what I witnessed was just discomfort, although I didn't even know it was abuse at that time. Just the fact that it involved genitals made me feel ashamed because we didn't have that emotional connection. Or she would ask me why I was talking about such an ugly thing. These things made me distance myself and could lead to conflicts. Those were the main reasons. But the fear of having an argument, maybe I had a slight fear of that.

In the above statements, it is evident that shame due to the lack of intimate relationships with the mother and the harsh judgment of the abusive act, which has become habitual, are factors that have led to the denial of abuse by the victim and the failure to disclose it.

Hadees, a 33-year-old who has graduated in architecture, responded to the question, 'Hadees, did you take any action to avoid the abuse and its repetition? Did you complain?' She said:

I didn't say anything to my mom because she wouldn't do anything. -What about your dad? Did you tell your dad? I didn't tell my dad either. I only told my aunt recently and one of my friends. This fear, stress, and feeling of disgust have cast a shadow over my life with all these questions. It has diminished a lot. I've worked really hard to forgive my mother and father, I've forgiven them. But there are things they do that bring back memories. I always wish someone could erase

these memories. I don't have any feelings towards my father and mother, I mean, I haven't even told them that if they died right now, I wouldn't be upset at all.

In some cases, children blame themselves for the abuse they have experienced. They believe that they are at fault for the abuse due to certain behaviours such as not being covered or not taking care of themselves against abuse. However, the minds of children and adolescents are influenced by society and its constructed beliefs. Since society lacks a supportive approach towards the victims of abuse and tends to view the abused as the culprits and wrongdoers rather than the victims, these social processes create such assumptions and beliefs in the minds of the abused and internalize them, perpetuating this flawed cycle. This is one of the reasons for their secrecy:

In these discussions, children perceive themselves as impure and guilty. For example, we see that they develop intense anger and negativity towards themselves, feeling that this is their own affair.'

In some cases, the lack of awareness and proper education for children is a reason for their passivity and increased vulnerability in such situations. Because the child doesn't even know what they should do to save themselves, especially when the abuser is someone close to them whom they consider part of their safe circle and trust. They are uncertain if they need to react to protect themselves from a trusted and familiar person, which further confuses them. This issue further complicates their situation because the trust already established by the child is also affected. Therefore, they prefer to remain silent and keep the matter as a trapped secret, even avoiding judgment from others and acquaintances. Sometimes, due to pre-existing affection for the abuser, they choose silence as well.

Other actions and the role of the institutions

What are the reactions of children's caregivers and some institutions to the abused individuals? Or what kind of reactions do children receive when they report their

experiences of abuse to those around them? This section addresses these questions. The main response revolves around two axes: lack of support and blaming the victim. Open codes related to this issue include: disbelief, lack of support, lack of maternal support due to fear of losing her sources of support from the perpetrator, victim-blaming, school punishment of the victim, considering the victim as a criminal, supporting the abuser, punishment and neglect, denial or concealment, victim's abuse, family indifference, violent reactions, being ignored, and examination or testing of the abused individual. The second axis revolves around support. In some cases, networks of individuals become a source of support for the abused child. Open codes related to this axis include: support, reporting abuse to support networks, reporting to the mother and cutting off contact with the abuser, neighbour intervention, understanding by the spouse at the time of marriage, and experiencing empathy. The following section examines these two axes.

In many cases, when caregivers realize that a child has been abused or when the abused child reports their experience to them, they not only fail to provide support but also blame and subject the child to further forms of abuse such as verbal abuse, psychological abuse, and scrutiny. One abused individual expressed it as follows:

One time, my brother and another boy went to engage in those activities. My family found out, and my father wanted to kill him, but my mother prevented it. After that, there was conflict in our house for about a month. Why? My father said our honour was taken away.

The taboo nature of sexual matters leads families to handle issues of abuse or curiosity-driven relationships among children in the worst possible way. Physical punishment is one of the methods that families sometimes resort to in such cases. A receptionist stated:

I remember a case where even the parents were aware that the brother was abusing the sister, but they tried to normalize the situation and even accused the girl of

having mental problems and lying because they didn't accept any solution and had taken the side of the male family member.

A 35-year-old woman who had been abused by various individuals stated:

I had the same problem with my uncle until I was 18, and every time I protested, my grandmother would ask me what I did to make him do this. This culture and belief exist in my mother's family that in any incident, it's the woman's fault, and men are not to blame. Even though they are a very religious family. Unfortunately, they say, the boys won't appear until the girls show themselves.

Parisa, who is 28 years old, describes her experience as follows:

I was busy cleaning the house, and no one was home. He [her brother] came by to visit us and realized no one was home. With ill intentions, he approached me, but I had grown up and stood up against him. He left the house with anger and resentment. A few hours later, when my older sister came to our father's house, I told her that today, when I was alone, our brother came to me with bad intentions. Then, my older sister, who is like an elder sister to me, attacked me and said horrible things. She threw me to the ground, put her weight on my throat, and pulled my hair so hard that her hand was full of my hair. I suffered injuries to my throat and shoulder. She told me that I am a liar and accused me of seducing and behaving in a promiscuous manner towards men. She called my older brother a liar and promiscuous.

The above narratives clearly demonstrate gender discrimination within the family. In many cases, families, especially traditional and patriarchal families, value men more

and fail to support girls who have been subjected to abuse. Instead, they blame them and consider them a source of shame for the family. They support the abuser, who may be a paternal uncle, brother, uncle, father, or others. Blaming the victim is another common reaction from people around the abused individuals. In many cases, the family considers the abused individual responsible because they believe the victim did not take care of themselves or engaged in behaviours that provoked the abuser and led to the abuse. As discussed earlier, if the victim is female, they are often blamed and considered guilty, assuming that they seduced or engaged in feminine actions that resulted in the abuse, causing them to feel shame. However, if the victim is male, they are usually hesitant to report the abuse due to the societal perception that abuse does not align with male pride and power, leading the victim to feel shame. Gender and common gender stereotypes regarding sexual abuse also play a role in the actions of others, and as a result, the abused individual is often denied and seen as the culprit rather than the victim. Mrs. Movaeh also mentioned in another narrative:

I remember when my mother found out about my sister being sexually abused, my own aunt and cousin inflicted a lot of damage on my sister. Now, wherever they go, people call her bipolar, saying she has been married three times and has always been involved in multiple relationships. Her situation is very bad. My mother protested against them and said they have no right to object and that your daughters are at fault.

The director of the Maghari Institute in Darvazeh Ghar neighbourhood said:

One of the neighbour's sons enters their room and forcefully assaults her. The elderly neighbour becomes aware of the situation and comes to her rescue. However, when the parents return to the scene and the incident is reported to them, instead of supporting her, they start insulting and demeaning her. They blame

her, disgrace the family, and ultimately force the girl to marry a man from Afghanistan.

In some cases, victims of abuse report their experiences to support networks, but they don't receive effective support. Support networks silence children because they believe that exposing the abuse would bring shame not only upon the perpetrator as a family member but also upon the victim's own family. On the other hand, bystanders perceive the victim as a 'marked person.' A 25-year-old woman who experienced abuse from her brother in childhood shares her account:

What were your feelings towards your brother after this incident?

It was disturbing, and I felt ashamed that my own brother did this to me. It bothered me a lot, thinking about why my brother did this to me. It caused me a lot of distress, but now it has somewhat resolved for me. It happened a while ago, and I don't think about it when I see my brother, but it does remind me. However, I have never confronted him about it.

Did you talk to anyone in your family about this incident?

I told two of my sisters, and they told me not to say anything and that it's ugly. So, I didn't talk to anyone else. Yes, you were forced into silence. Yes, besides them, I didn't tell anyone.

The above statements indicate that the support networks themselves contribute to the victim's sense of shame. They not only fail to provide support but also create feelings of shame and encourage the victim to remain passive and silent.

Sometimes poverty prevents families from supporting abused children. In some cases, other support networks, such as the mother, hesitate to support the victim because they fear that the abuser will cut off their support, leaving them impoverished and helpless. Mrs. Ismaili, a teacher and

painting instructor in several non-governmental organizations, said:

If we let them know, they wouldn't listen because they would say we have enough misfortune, don't involve us in these issues.

Mrs. Meem, a school director and social activist, said:

One of the teachers contacted me in the Teachers and Children Association. Her mother knew that her father had passed away, and her older brother had a sexual relationship with her. It wasn't a vaginal relationship; it was from behind. The teacher noticed that the girl, who was 15 years old, became paler every day. She informed us, and we brought the mother there. Then the mother said she couldn't say anything because her financial support would be cut off.

Leila had experienced one of the most bitter encounters. She not only didn't receive any support from her parents, but she was severely beaten and even subjected to a medical examination, which was another form of abuse. When asked why the sexual abuse didn't continue and came to an end, she said:

In a way, I thought, at most, I would be beaten by my father and mother. I could tolerate that. But I didn't do that; I mean, I came to this conclusion. I also got beaten. Oh, so you went and told your mother. No, I didn't tell her; she went and told. The boy told my mother, and I received an extremely severe beating from my father's side. Extremely severe. To the point that my whole body was bruised. I became a wreck. And suddenly, unfortunately, my maternal cousin, who is now my husband, started molesting me. My father saw me and they took me to the legal doctor for virginity examination.

These families and support networks are not the only ones who fail to support abused children; many other institutions that are in some way connected to or have legal responsibility for children also do not provide support. It should be noted that this does not mean that all these institutions act in the same way, and their responses can vary depending on the circumstances. Considering the case of incest and sexual relations with relatives, there is no distinction between incest and adultery in the law and even in religious discourse. All of them are considered under the umbrella of incest, which led to the execution of Leila Mafi, a girl who was accused of incest and sexual relations with her brothers, despite repeatedly using the term 'abuse' to describe her relationship with her brothers. A sexually abused girl who sought help from others to escape the abuse of her family members was condemned as a prostitute due to the insensitivity and failure to differentiate between abuse and adultery, and she was sentenced to execution (Maljoo, 2010: 4-33). Therefore, considering abused individuals as criminals is a common occurrence in institutions.

In Iranian society, the legal discourse aligns with the religious discourse, in such a way that there is never a distinction or boundary between abuse and adultery in both discourses. These two concepts are used interchangeably in terms of meaning, although abuse is treated as incest and punished accordingly. Thus, the victim, who is the abused individual, is transformed into the guilty and sinful person, considered a criminal who should be punished by the institutions. This itself perpetuates the denial of abuse by the victim and the failure to disclose it.

The founder and president of the Iranian AIDS Association has stated:

Unfortunately, in our country and in some places where there is a lack of education, we do not approach this issue from a preventive perspective. We sit at the end of the line and examine the damages without intervening to prevent these incidents. Unfortunately, our laws are not strict and deterrent enough to address

these issues and protect these victims who are subjected to assault. They are viewed as criminals, which often prevents them from expressing their stories. There are circumstances that we generally do not know, or rather, we know, but the behaviour persists, and this phenomenon is responded to in a negative way in our country.

He further stated that the lack of legal protection for abused individuals and even the perception of them as criminals in two accounts:

Since the existing laws do not see the abuser as a sick individual in need of counselling and treatment, but rather solely imposes punishment on them, families and relatives are fearful of the consequences of disclosing child sexual abuse, including subsequent shame and problems that they will face in the pursuit of justice. They are afraid and choose to remain silent, denying or even refusing to acknowledge the situation themselves.

The denial mechanism occurs within the abused individual and their family because the legal discourse, once abuse is revealed, not only does not protect the rights of the victim but also considers the abused individual as a criminal who should be punished. Due to the dominance of this legal discourse and its enforcement through existing laws, the abused individual and their family prefer denial and non-disclosure. Regarding the abuser in the law, various punishments are provided, including the possibility of execution. However, there is a lack of supportive and executive laws for the abused child, and it is not uncommon for the abused child to be labelled as the accused within their own community. Unfortunately, this has also led to further empowerment of other perpetrators.

A psychologist from the Yarigaran Pouyan Institute describes a case where an abused individual is expelled from school due

to their experience of abuse and is given away in marriage despite the child's consent:

The non-biological mother said that the deceased (referring to the abuser) doesn't have a problem, and the problem lies with the mirror that tempts the father. I remember that they were expelled from school, and the child ran away from home afterward. The welfare organization took the child and transferred them to the Welfare Organization in Mashhad, and then they were entrusted to the Tehran Welfare Organization. Later, when they were 19 years old, they were given to a 50-year-old man.

In contrast to the lack of support for abused children, there are others who provide support in various ways. Narges, a 36-year-old who experienced abuse from her uncle, said:

Three or four years ago, I told my mother. Oh, after 20 years. I told my sister the next day. We were at my grandmother's house in Isfahan, and I told her to tell Behrouz to take us to Tehran. She asked why? I said I'll tell you when we're on the way, and I told her on the way. She asked why we came to Isfahan and stayed. My sister supported me. Yes, even though she was small, she was six or seven years old. Even though she was younger, she understood. Yes, she understood. I trusted her. Yes, even now, it's the same. My whole family is on one side, and my sister is on the other. I tell her everything.

One of the individuals who experienced support expressed it as follows:

On the way to school, when I was subjected to a violent act, I screamed for help, and our neighbour arrived and intervened. I later told someone about it, and they showed empathy and support.

The intervention of neighbours to prevent crime and harassment is very important. Research has shown that neighbourhoods where residents have trust and willingness to intervene in order to prevent crime are safer neighbourhoods. In fact, a neighbourhood structure in which social capital such as security, trust, honesty, and empathy are prominent has a stronger sense of community and cohesion. When it comes to dealing with sexual harassment against the victim, informing others with empathy and a greater sense of security leads to a better response and provides support. As the harassed individual mentioned earlier, the neighbour intervened in a way, preventing further assault, and later shared the experience of assault with their friend, receiving emotional support from them. In the case of the treatment of sexually harassed individuals, support from the social network of the victim will have a significant role in their psychological therapy. Ms. H has stated:

I told my mother about my cousin's incident. My mother was very attentive to us, and when my cousin did this, they reacted strongly. My mother always looked out for us and never left us alone with anyone, and this incident was not repeated.

Sometimes, individuals who have experienced harassment may choose to share their past experiences with their spouses years into their marriage, and on occasion, they find understanding and support in response. Ms. M told us:

Well, my husband knew about my situation, and he understood me very well. He saw my anxieties and tried hard to find a solution without rushing, making everything easier step by step.

As the above narratives have shown, we have encountered two major types of reactions: one is the lack of support, and the other is receiving support. Children who do not receive support and experience various forms of harassment due to being blamed are unable to cope with and resolve the issue. Social support is very important for prevention, coping, and even the

treatment of experienced harassment. Firstly, it acts as a powerful protector, preventing the occurrence of harassment, and secondly, when the harassed child reports the experience of harassment to their support networks and receives support from them, it becomes a threat against the harasser and dissuades them from continuing the harassment because they know that the child has supporters who will stand by them in times of distress. Additionally, receiving support after harassment enables the child to cope with the negative consequences and emotions of harassment more effectively, which plays an important role in the healing process. An important question that future research needs to address is when or why some support networks of harassed individuals provide support to children while others not only fail to support but also blame and subject the child to various forms of harassment.

Chapter Three: Consequences of Sexual Violence

Introduction

Sexual harassment, especially during childhood, is one of the most traumatic and distressing experiences an individual can endure, with far-reaching and potentially lifelong consequences. In the previous chapters, we reviewed in-depth the lived experiences of abused children through intensive interviews with victims themselves as well as professional social workers who work with these cases.

This chapter builds upon those first-hand accounts to delve into the multifaceted ramifications of child sexual abuse, exploring the profound impact it can have on various aspects of a survivor's life. The consequences of sexual harassment can manifest overtly or remain concealed, surfacing immediately after the abuse or emerging in later stages of life if the child does not receive appropriate treatment and support. This chapter examines the diverse array of repercussions, including weakened relationships and social trust, negative emotions

and feelings of isolation, psychological and personality disorders, maladaptive patterns, impaired functioning, physical injuries, suicidal ideation and self-harm, premature sexual maturation, risky sexual behaviours, and difficulties in establishing and maintaining marital relationships.

Notably, the experience of child sexual abuse can have severe structural and institutional consequences, eroding the very fabric of social capital – the essential elements of trust, honesty, and solidarity that foster societal cohesion and collective well-being. This chapter explores how the erosion of fundamental trust, stemming from the violation endured during childhood, can impede an individual's ability to form meaningful connections and navigate various social roles throughout their life, including that of a spouse.

Furthermore, the chapter delves into the complex interplay between sexual abuse and marital relationships, shedding light on the challenges survivors face in establishing intimacy, trust, and fulfilment within the context of marriage. It examines the phenomena of early and delayed marriages, often driven by societal norms surrounding honour and chastity, and how these dynamics can perpetuate a cycle of harm and violation.

By drawing from the powerful lived experience narratives laid out earlier and examining the overarching consequences they illustrate, this chapter aims to raise awareness and promote a deeper understanding of the profound and enduring impact of child sexual abuse trauma on individuals, families, and society as a whole. Through this exploration, it underscores the urgent need for effective interventions, support systems, and societal shifts to address this critical issue and mitigate its far-reaching effects.

Consequences, in the Grounded Theory, refer to the outcomes of interactions influenced by the relevant conditions. It is undeniable that experiencing sexual harassment, especially during childhood, is one of the most painful and stressful experiences that some individuals may go through in their lives.

Research findings support this statement. The consequences of sexual harassment can be apparent or hidden. Some may

manifest after the experience of harassment, while others may emerge in later stages of life if children do not receive appropriate treatment following the abuse. This can happen, for example, when children lose trust in others as a result of harassment and their sense of security is compromised; this consequence not only remains hidden but also has negative implications for their lives. Other consequences follow a similar pattern. Research suggest the most identified consequences include weakened relationships and social trust throughout life, negative emotions and feelings of uniqueness, psychological and personality disorders and their symptoms, development of maladaptive patterns, impaired functioning, physical injuries, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and self-harm, early maturation, exposure to risky sexual knowledge and behaviours, risky behaviours, early or delayed marriage, and difficulties in marital relationships and divorce.

After discussing the consequences of sexual harassment, two additional elements require clarification: identifying the affected individuals and the treatment of sexual harassment, and the treatment system in Iran. The first element can assist professionals in the field of child abuse to better identify children who have experienced abuse in their interventions.

The second element, the treatment of sexual harassment and the treatment system in Iran, is a comprehensive topic that can be the subject of further research. In this element, the focus is primarily on major disruptions in the treatment system and the treatment process based on field findings. A significant portion of the consequences of child sexual abuse that affected children experience is due to the lack of access to effective treatment, as in many cases, such treatments are not available.

Structural and Institutional Consequences

Weakening of social relationships and social capital

Experts in the field of humanities, such as Bourdieu, have identified four types of capital that individuals and human societies possess, which contribute to personal and collective well-being. These capitals include material, cultural, symbolic, and social capital. In this context, the focus will primarily be on

the latter type, namely social capital. Researchers have identified numerous dimensions and components of this capital, all of which revolve around social relationships and trust.

Rothstein (1998) defines social capital as a dual-component entity, comprising 'social' and 'capital'. The 'social' component pertains to the interpersonal connections among individuals, while 'capital' refers to a collective resource that communities, organizations, and individuals hold. Entities endowed with this resource are expected to be adept at executing tasks that would be unachievable in the absence of a substantial amount of social capital.

At the individual level, social capital is the sum of the number of social relationships multiplied by the level of trust present within those relationships (Rothstein, 2014: 25-123). A crucial point in the discussion of social capital is that individuals, by possessing it, are able to engage in activities that would be unattainable without it. For example, a child who has appropriate relationships with family members and peers, accompanied by trust, can lead a safer and happier life. They can even report instances of abuse if they experience any.

Trust and security connect an individual to significant others in their life, fostering a sense of belonging and social and emotional bonds. In other words, it enables the possibility of integration within social groups, including families and other communities. Conversely, when this trust and sense of security are compromised or weakened, it leads to social exclusion and isolation, preventing the individual from benefiting from emotional support and group cohesion. Indeed, assets such as trust and security bring about social empathy and influence the individual's social bonds with groups and society as a whole, as well as social cohesion. Samaneh, a 35-year-old woman with a master's degree in law, has stated:

There was no one I wanted to talk to. No one I could trust who could understand me. It feels like there was no trustworthy person or space for me to go to. There

was no security provided for me to say that something better will happen afterward.

Another point is that the shape and extent of individuals' social relationships with their surrounding networks change along the path of life or in different stages of life. Psychologists have proposed various classifications for stages of development, and one of the most reputable ones is Erikson's. He identifies eight stages for human life as follows: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation and withdrawal, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair (Saif and others, 2013).

Notable points about these stages are firstly that individuals face a crisis in each stage, and if they successfully navigate through it, they progress to the next stage of their psychosocial development. Secondly, in many of these stages, there are other individuals present in a person's life who can significantly influence their success or failure in dealing with the crisis of that stage.

Sociologists such as Loubland have identified different social networks in the path of individuals' lives. For example, during infancy, the child's family is their only social network. However, as the child grows older and enters subsequent stages of life, their social network expands due to the roles they assume in society. Later, they enter networks of friends, classmates, colleagues, and so on, and after marriage, they become part of a network of social relationships with their life partner (Loubland, 2006).

A more significant point here is that the experience of harm can damage the trust of the harmed individuals towards others and limit the scope of their social networks and social trust. In fact, the extent of social networks that arise from an individual's social trust from their early years, influenced by their trust in significant others in their life, namely family members, and the level of emotional and biological attachment to them,

determines their social perception and mindset, and thus shapes their lifestyle.

The experience of harm can occur in childhood, but these experiences can persist throughout all subsequent stages of life. The underlying mechanism can be described as follows: when a person experiences harm, their sense of existential and social security is endangered, leading them to lose trust in others and the world they live in. Consequently, at the subsequent stages of life, they may not enter into meaningful relationships or relationships accompanied by a sense of trust and security. Dr Morris Setudegan, a psychotherapist, explains two related narratives in this context:

They lose their confidence in the system from childhood, and they don't trust anyone. They find it difficult to establish connections with anyone.

The case I mentioned in Isfahan, she said, 'I was so in love with my teacher because my father was a doctor, and my mother was a teacher. They never had time for me, and I craved attention. He would say, 'Let's go to the garden,' and those moments meant everything to me. Until the moment he violated me, I trusted him.' This lack of affection and love, I feel that the more someone loves you, the deeper the wound becomes when they betray your trust. In these cases, fundamental trust is destroyed. Emotional scars form, and these individuals believe they are prone to being attacked.

The above statements indicate that there is a relationship between social capital such as trust and emotional bonds and when the emotional bond and intimacy between a person and significant others in their life is weakened, they trust others and become vulnerable to sexual assault. In this situation, their belief system and fundamental trust are damaged, and they can no longer establish constructive and interactive trust and empathy with their immediate environment and relationships

in subsequent stages of life. Ms. R, a counsellor and specialist in social harms, said:

Unfortunately, when it comes to relationships with family members and relatives, these relationships are often repetitive. One of the severe harms is incestuous relationships. It has many detrimental effects. One of them is the mirror effect, where a child expects their guardian to be their supporter but instead, they harm the child. This contradiction is so intense that the harm caused is immense. The closer the person is, the stronger the child's dependency, and the more the child suffers because they expect that person to make the world safe for them and be there for them. But when the child experiences harm, the primary feeling they experience is a sense of shock.

In fact, the above statements indicate that individuals who experience sexual abuse from their immediate relatives, especially parents, during childhood will suffer from psychological and internal conflicts and contradictions in adulthood and later stages of life. These conflicts and contradictions will manifest as issues and difficulties in terms of security, trust, and interpersonal relationships with the social world and the surrounding environment.

Close communication networks for children, such as parents, teachers, or anyone else whom the child feels can gain trust and security from, are very important. Their presence makes the child feel that others and the world are trustworthy and that the world is a safe place for them to live.

Psychologists and sociologists refer to existential or fundamental trust, which, as Giddens states, has its roots in reliance and confidence in righteous and credible individuals, usually derived from a child's earliest experiences. What Erikson calls 'basic trust' is a relationship that leads to emotional and cognitive orientation towards others, the tangible world, and personal identity. The experience of fundamental trust is essentially the core of hopeful existence.

In fact, fundamental trust is the result of a kind of unconscious socialization, trust in the tangible and concrete world, as well as trust in the permanence of others, which stems from the experiences of a child's early developmental stages.

According to Giddens, fundamental trust reduces anxiety and creates a sense of continuity and order in events, even those that do not directly involve personal perception or existential security (Giddens, 2008, p. 322). Giddens emphasizes fundamental trust in the context of trust and 'existential security.' In his view, existential security refers to the confidence that most people have in the continuity of their self-identity and the durability of social and material environments around them (Giddens, 1998, p. 110). When a child's trust and security are endangered, the child becomes withdrawn and isolated.

In this regard, a psychologist from the Yarigaran Pouyan Institute told us this about one of his clients:

I want to tell you another case that was more painful for me than anything else, called Niloufar. Niloufar was subjected to sexual abuse by her father at a young age. She was extremely antisocial and had no patience with anyone. She hated everyone, even though I was very kind to her. Once, I even bought her a birthday present, but the next day when I said hello to her, she turned her face away. She never wanted to have an emotional relationship with anyone, not even a smile. When you looked into her eyes, she would turn her face away and avoid people.

The aforementioned statements highlight the profound impact of sexual abuse by immediate relatives during childhood on individuals. Apart from the internal conflicts and disturbances in security and trust that arise, victims often experience antisocial emotions that lead them to adopt behaviours rooted in isolation and detachment from others. However, it is important to recognize that not all victims respond in the same way. Some may exhibit behaviours characterized by rebellion,

extreme violence, and an overall inability to connect with their environment and other people.

Considering the context of Iranian society, where sexual abuse by immediate relatives during childhood is becoming more prevalent, we can anticipate a rise in individuals who struggle with antisocial tendencies and face challenges in establishing constructive and active interactions within their social sphere. This has significant implications for the social fabric of the society as a whole. The erosion of social capital, which encompasses values such as honesty, trust, and solidarity, becomes a concerning consequence. These elements of social capital play a vital role in the growth and development of a society across all dimensions and aspects.

The weakening of social capital can have far-reaching consequences. Honesty, which forms the foundation of trust, becomes compromised, leading to a breakdown in interpersonal relationships and the erosion of social cohesion. Trust, another crucial element, becomes fragile or non-existent, preventing individuals from forming meaningful connections and inhibiting cooperation within communities. Solidarity, which fosters collective action and support, diminishes, further isolating individuals and hindering the development of a compassionate and interconnected society.

It is important to address and combat sexual abuse within immediate family circles to protect the well-being of individuals and the overall health of the society. By providing support, raising awareness, and implementing effective interventions, it is possible to mitigate the adverse effects of such abuse and work towards restoring and strengthening social capital. This involves creating safe spaces for survivors, promoting mental health services, implementing educational programs on consent and healthy relationships, and fostering a culture that prioritizes the well-being of children and holds perpetrators accountable.

Ultimately, by addressing the issue of sexual abuse within immediate family relationships and its impact on individuals' social functioning, society can strive towards healing,

resilience, and the creation of a nurturing environment that safeguards the rights and well-being of all its members.

Mrs. B said about one of her clients:

The child's behavioural problems in the kindergarten have been evident in their rebelliousness and extremely weak social interactions with their instructors and other children. The child has been incompatible with the environment and also with their mother. After becoming aware of the situation, the institution provides psychological support for the child.

Ms. S, a social activist who works with one of her clients who tends to be withdrawn, told us:

Psychological interventions such as play therapy have been helpful, but there are still lingering effects. This child is extremely timid, always wanting to hide and not be seen. Their self-confidence is low, and they are not like other children who are loud and active. For example, you would see them sitting in a corner, playing by themselves.

The above statements indicate that children who experience sexual abuse, especially by family members, tend to exhibit extreme and imbalanced behaviours, a fear of being seen, and either exhibit aggressive and violent tendencies or seek to go unnoticed. They become socially isolated and struggle to engage in balanced and constructive interactions with their immediate environment.

When the trust of these children in others is shattered due to the abuse, it affects their relationships with other people. Individuals assume various roles in their social relationships throughout different stages of life. One of these roles is the role of a spouse. The experience of abuse, particularly among girls, can also impact marital relationships. Mrs. F said:

She was afraid of relationships. She wanted to get engaged and married, but the only thing that terrified her was the mirror that reflected her married self.

Ms. S has also mentioned:

She didn't trust any man. She was so sensitive to hugs and physical contact that even her family couldn't hug her until she was 20 years old. She was constantly trying to avoid this issue. Then she couldn't say no, and she thought it was her duty to engage in any advances made by a man. She got married and initially faced a lot of difficulties. She said that whenever she slept next to her husband, she felt like he was violating her, until she gradually came to terms with herself. However, she still had that mindset and believed it was her duty. It's as if she was created to do such things.

One of the children at the Behnam Maghari Institution said:

At the age of 9, I was sexually assaulted by my father's close friend, and I felt a sense of discomfort towards him. After that, I couldn't trust anyone.

These narratives reveal the presence of difficulties in the marital relationships of individuals who have been sexually abused during childhood, along with a mindset based on violation. Additionally, these individuals may struggle with assertiveness in their social interactions.

Early marriage and delayed marriage

Early marriage and the absence of marriage can both give rise to sexual abuse, and these phenomena are influenced by social factors. This section aims to explore the relationship between sexual abuse and early marriage. Central to this discussion are the societal norms of chastity and honour. According to these norms, particularly for girls, engaging in sexual relations before marriage is considered unacceptable. Any compromise to their honour jeopardizes not only their personal chastity but also the honour of both the girl and her family.

When a girl's honour is compromised, two potential outcomes arise. Firstly, it is likely that potential suitors will no longer consider proposing to her. Secondly, in many cases, families may expedite her marriage to prevent the exposure of abuse and safeguard the girl's honour. Families are acutely aware that if their daughter's lack of chastity becomes evident, finding a suitable partner for her would become challenging, leading to feelings of shame and disgrace.

In situations where the issue of abuse becomes apparent, two possible scenarios emerge. Firstly, the family may force the girl into a marriage with her abuser, believing that such a union will somehow compensate for the harm inflicted and restore their honour. Secondly, they may hastily arrange a marriage with the first available suitor, irrespective of whether he is a compatible match for their daughter or whether she has attained emotional and psychological maturity.

These coerced marriages often occur without the consent of the victim, whether during childhood or in later stages of life. As the abused individuals were denied agency in their marriage decisions, they frequently experience dissatisfaction with their marital union and the overall relationship. Furthermore, due to their prior experience of abuse perpetrated by men, many develop apprehension and aversion towards them. The violation of their security, chastity, and honour during childhood leaves a lasting impact, making it challenging for them to find contentment within the marital relationship.

In this regard, one of the abused children said:

They forced me to marry my husband so that they could prevent the disgrace of the family.

Another person talked about the consequences of abuse, saying,

I used to avoid the opposite sex, I was against marriage, then they forced me into marriage, and for years, I hated my husband and all men.

This type of marriage often occurs without the consent of the child, both in childhood and later stages. Since the criteria and the consent of the abused child are not taken into account for marriage, they are not satisfied with their marriage and therefore not satisfied with the marital relationship. On the other hand, because they have been abused by a man during childhood, in many cases, they fear and despise men because their security, chastity, and honour have been compromised as a result of the assault. Therefore, when they enter into a marital relationship, they are not satisfied with their husband or with marriage and the marital relationship. Mrs. M said about her own marriage:

I got married at the age of 26, and if they had allowed me to remain single, I would not have gotten married. They did not allow me to be single because they did not want me to return to a home where my father died when I was 18, and my grandfather was the only one left, and everyone wanted him to raise me. I told them I wanted to live alone, but they didn't allow it. If they had allowed me, I would never have gotten married.

Mrs. B narrated:

It had very bad consequences, and mentally, I still think I haven't returned to a normal life. This has caused me to marry early, with someone I don't love. I have now been separated for about 2 years, but not legally. It has affected my future life.

Sheida describes her experience of early marriage as follows:

[...] Afterwards, I was very afraid that someone would find out and it would tarnish my honour. [...] Then I wanted to be with boys, I constantly felt attached to them, I wanted to be with boys. This caused concern for my family; they were afraid that I would ruin things and tarnish their honour, so they married me off; I got married at the age of 15.

The above statements indicate that the same mechanism that led to the prediction of secret childhood sexual abuse, namely the issue of honour and prevailing societal norms, continues to perpetuate the abuse in later stages of life, affecting the individual's personal and social life in different ways. Due to the preservation of dignity and social honour, the individual is forced to spend the rest of their life with someone they have no emotional connection with, and this extension of violation and abuse is legitimized through marriage as a social contract. Shida, who lived in a small rural environment, was worried that other villagers would find out about the abuse, and her family was also concerned about her purity, which led to her being married off at a young age.

Leila's experience of marriage with an abuser or someone who harmed her is as follows:

A: Once, unfortunately, my cousin, who is now my husband, sexually assaulted me. My father saw and took us to the legal physician for examination. They beat me horribly, to the extent that blood was coming out of my mouth. My whole face was swollen.

Q: How old were you at that time?

A: I was 12-13 years old. I was not very young.

Q: So, your mother and father found out before you even spoke about it?

A: Yes, exactly. And you know what's interesting? I was accused, and it was heavy for me then, and it's still heavy now. When I wanted to get married to my cousin's son, my mother said something interesting to me. She said, 'Leila, there's something about her that can't keep her mouth shut, and she quickly tells her sisters and grandmother.' She told my grandmother, and she shocked the whole family. When this happened, my mother said to me, 'Leila, who will marry you now? This incident has happened. He knows everything and wants to marry you.'

As the above narratives indicate, child marriage and forced marriages, regardless of the girls' desires, have consequences for the girls both in childhood and later stages of life. Another point is that marrying the victim to the abuser maintains the cycle of abuse, as the abuser is usually mentally unstable and unable to manage their own life and family. On the other hand, marrying off the abused person to the abuser can perpetuate negative emotions such as anger, hatred, and anxiety, which affect their relationship with their spouse and other dimensions of their life. Lack of interest and inclination towards marriage is another consequence of childhood abuse.

Mrs. Farzanpour describes a case of harassment by neighbourhood boys as follows:

I was also afraid of relationships. I said, I'm very scared. I wanted him to propose and get married, but the only thing that scares me is marriage.

Mrs. K, who was assaulted by her brother and father, says:

Well, I had a very bad feeling. The feeling that I can't get married. I can't wear a wedding dress. I can't make my mother proud. The feeling of why did this happen? Why did he even come home? Why didn't he stop when I hit his face? Why was he so indifferent? Why did he do this with his hand?

She eventually gets married to someone, but she faces numerous problems in her marital relationship and is forced to divorce. It is clear that one of the consequences of child sexual abuse by relatives is forced marriage, usually in the form of child marriage, and the other is divorce, which often occurs after forced marriages.

The appropriate approach of families and society towards this type of abuse not only fails to prevent its continuation but also leads to the emergence of other damages and issues, causing family and societal conflicts and imposing costs on them, perpetuating the cycle of harm.

Another abused child has been forced to reveal the secret of her virginity at the time of marriage. She, who had been subjected to long-term abuse by her father, says:

On the day we were supposed to get married, I told my mother that I'm not a virgin, and I told her that my father caused this disaster for me.

As the above experiences reveal, sexual abuse leads to early marriage or the inability to marry or marry individuals whom the child does not want to marry, such as the abuser. The mechanisms through which abuse leads to early marriage or marriage at a young age have been explained earlier, and in this section, we focus on the relationship between abuse, especially assault, and the inability to marry.

Being a virgin is still perceived as a value in some or many societies. However, when someone is harassed and loses their virginity due to sexual assault, it becomes a problem. When marriage proposals come for them, they have no desire to get married due to fear of the issue being exposed and their family's reputation being tarnished. The survivor is afraid that once the groom finds out about the situation, he will reject her or divorce her, leading to the loss of marriage opportunities due to the fear of dishonour and rejection in many cases. In some cases, even the potential suitor refuses to accept her because she doesn't have a virginity certificate creating an obstacle to marriage for this group of individuals. In cases where marriage does occur, the marital relationship is faced with difficulties or may even break down, as described in the case of Mrs. B mentioned above.

Mrs. Nouri, a teacher, spoke about a survivor in an NGOs and said:

When she got married, she was very scared of establishing a physical relationship and didn't want to engage in it. She didn't want to get married. She was afraid of her own father and all men. She was forced into marriage by her father's force and violence with one of her relatives. She got divorced, and the divorce

process was very long. Now she doesn't want to get married anymore because of this experience. Even after years of friendship, when I introduced her to a new case and suggested marriage, she refused. I told her to see a counsellor to understand what the problem was in her previous life. In the end, she confessed this to me. She has lost hope in men and has developed a negative view of them.

Emerging issues in interpersonal relationships and the increasing divorce rate

The experience of abuse during childhood in various forms can have a negative impact on marital relationships and can lead to dissatisfaction with married life and its collapse. As mentioned earlier, the experience of sexual abuse has multiple negative consequences, one of which is the weakening of trust and social relationships in one's life path.

Let's consider an individual who has experienced abuse in childhood and, due to this experience, neither feels secure nor trusts others. This person eventually gets married for some reason and enters into a marital relationship. The question is, can a woman who does not trust others, especially men, have a successful married life? In this study, it was observed that for survivors who had entered married life due to their experience of abuse and other related issues caused serious problems in their married life. Some of these women feel violated or perceive themselves as sexual service providers. In this regard, Mrs. S mentioned a case where she was sexually assaulted by a neighbourhood supermarket owner during her childhood:

I couldn't trust any man anymore. I was so sensitive to hugs and kisses that even my family couldn't hug me until I was 20 years old. I tried to escape from this issue altogether. Then, I couldn't say no, and I thought it was my duty to fulfil this role when a man approached me. So, I got married, and in the beginning, I encountered many difficulties. I used to think that whenever I slept next to this person, he was sexually assaulting me. It

took a while for me to come to terms with myself, but I still had that mindset and said it was my duty. It was as if I was created to do such things.

From the above statements by the survivor, it seems that she had a strong sense of helplessness and powerlessness, which derived from a sense of worthlessness and degradation. As a result, she constantly felt violated by her husband in their sexual relationship and, therefore, could not establish constructive emotional relationships in her interactions. A 33-year-old social worker who herself experienced sexual abuse in childhood shared the following:

I remember when I was about 24 years old, I entered into a friendship with a guy for the first time, and although the relationship was healthy and good, I was always anxious and felt bad about the other person. Whenever he expressed affection, I felt like he was lying. It bothered me. When he caressed me or hugged me, my skin was irritated, or rather, I should say I didn't understand affection. I thought everything was a lie, and I felt like I was suffering in that relationship. I eventually ended that relationship... There was always something inside me telling me that all men are traitors, and the worst thing of all was the sexual desire that was suppressed within me. I didn't even have any sexual inclination or desire towards any man, even the one I was in love with, because I was afraid of sex. I was afraid of sexual relationships until a much later age, even until I was 30, and I was always running away. Despite having good options for marriage in my life, I never had any inclination to get married.

The above narratives vividly demonstrate how these individuals, due to the experience of abuse, have developed a series of assumptions about themselves, men, sexual relationships with the opposite sex, or married life, which have led to serious issues in their marital life and emotional

relationship with the opposite sex. These issues have a direct relationship with their experience of sexual abuse. The fear of sexual relationships is strongly pronounced in the victims. Samaneh, a 35-year-old woman with a master's degree in law who was sexually assaulted by her uncle, told us:

See, the marriage I entered into was mostly a wrong choice to escape from home. Because I had a lot of uncontrollable conflicts with them, and I wanted to escape from them. I made a choice that now I think, why did I make this choice? Then the choice I made, you know, all the things I thought it would be, it wasn't. Then this person gradually approached me, and it was the same as allowing myself to get close to him. I don't know what happened at that moment, I didn't delve into the details much, but I know I didn't experience love with this person, and I didn't have any sexual relationship that was enjoyable and pleasurable with that person. Because every time it happened, I thought I was being violated.

Samaneh's narrative about her marriage reflects important implications of sexual abuse and sexual relationships in her married life. As a result of the abuse experience, she no longer receives a sense of security and trust from social networks such as her family. In order to escape the family environment, she considers marriage as an option and ultimately chooses it. Her choice is not based on love and affection but rather on the criterion of escaping from the family environment. The experience of abuse in childhood and a negative view of people, especially men, along with marrying someone she does not have affection for, have caused her to be dissatisfied with her married life and sexual relationship, and even to feel violated in sexual relationships. She further stated:

The next thing is that I consider the opposite sex, in general, to be all liars and deceivers unless proven otherwise. When I want to enter a relationship, I have excitement and enthusiasm, but as soon as I say hello to

someone and move forward, I say, 'No, this is not my type of person, they are only seeking sex.'

What Samaneh has elucidated mirrors the sentiments conveyed by Ms. Soltani. There exists a persistent negativity directed towards the sex associated with the abuser, to the extent that all individuals sharing the same sex are unjustly viewed as potential perpetrators and abusers. Consequently, this skewed perspective impairs the victim's ability to form healthy social connections with members of that sex. As another abused individual stated:

My mindset about sex has been ruined, I didn't enjoy sexual intercourse, and I had no inclination for it.

It is natural for a person who has experienced abuse and has not received proper treatment to face serious issues and various challenges in life, including marital problems. Mrs. M's account of her experience of sexual abuse and its aftermath in her married life is as follows:

Q: Why do you say I never wanted to get married? What feeling is that?

A: Well, I'm someone who finds more comfort in solitude.

Q: Does being married bother you? I'm okay with it now.

A: I'm okay. Then I got married to a sensitive and highly emotional person, and our differences became significant. When our child was born, things got worse. Until around 2014, if I'm not mistaken, I told him that we should separate. Then I told him that our daughter's name is Stiya, and I don't want her for you. His illness had worsened, and he refused to take his medication.

Mrs. M's lack of interest in marriage is likely due to the damage caused by sexual abuse and the lack of effective treatment. Even after entering a marital relationship, she continues to face various problems such as marital discord and infidelity.

Narges, a 36-year-old woman, described her marital situation as follows:

A: I was half asleep at the door when I saw my clothes falling from behind, and my uncle was half-leaning on me, and nothing happened. But it messes with my mind and my mouth.

Q: How many years have passed since this incident?

A: 25 years.

Q: Do these scenes still haunt you in these 25 years? A: Yes, they bother me. Does it also affect your sexual relationship?

A: We avoid this issue altogether, whether when I was married or now.

Narges's experience and her way of coping with the abuse show how her life and married life have been affected for many years due to abuse and the lack of treatment. If society had sex education available and an effective healthcare system in place, individuals in this situation would seek help from mental health professionals and receive treatment.

Sex education provides awareness and skills, enabling abused individuals to seek help from specialists in this field for treatment. In fact, in Iranian society, there is a lack of sex education that could effectively prevent child sexual abuse, nor are there coordinated and systematic policies and social support services by educational institutions and social organizations to protect victims. These deficiencies lead to a daily increase in the frequency and prevalence of such abuses and perpetuate their long-lasting and escalating consequences. Mrs. B, who was assaulted by her uncle, said:

This made me get married early, to someone I don't love. I have been separated for about 2 years now, but legally it hasn't affected my future because I'm an extremely sensitive person. Even though at that time, I didn't have any specific problems in terms of work or

things like that, mentally I was completely devastated. I even say that it affected my life.

These two narratives effectively illustrate the experience of sexual abuse and the challenges in marital and sexual relationships. Case A involves a child marriage.

Child marriage is contrary to human rights and is prohibited according to international human rights documents. Most countries have banned such marriages, except for a few, including Iran. Child marriages violate human rights because children have not reached an age where they can make informed decisions about marriage and their future. Children who experience sexual abuse during childhood often continue to suffer from this abuse in the form of marital relationships later in life. As mentioned by person B, they become ‘damaged, and their future is affected.’ Fereshteh, a 39-year-old woman, said:

In the year and a half that I have been here with psychologists and all, what could you expect me to say? It's the trust, and I thought that maybe that's what destroyed me, and really, most of my misery has always been because of this, including my addiction and turning to drugs. I've been married twice, and I can't forget, and I still won't forget until the end of my life.

According to self-reported experiences in conducted research, drug abuse is one of the ways in which individuals try to suppress their emotions. Since sexual abuse causes destructive emotions resulting from the experience and memory of sexual abuse, such as feelings of worthlessness, humiliation, pessimism, fear, shame, guilt, powerlessness, hatred, condemnation, anger, and drug abuse becomes one of the chosen methods to temporarily numb these emotions. Therefore, if proper policies are not implemented by families and society when dealing with these individuals, addiction also becomes a consequence. Fereshteh's experience, like that of

other children who have been victims of sexual abuse, involves experiencing difficulties in marital relationships and divorce.

It is not claimed that all children who have experienced abuse in childhood necessarily face problems in their marital and sexual lives. However, as many cases show, abuse has played a fundamental role in these issues and has significantly affected their lives.

The experience of sexual abuse occurs within a specific context and framework and is influenced by various factors discussed at the beginning of this chapter. These children not only experience abuse but are generally not provided with conducive conditions to socialize in an effective manner, where their security and needs are met and they can experience happiness and play, and their skills are invested in.

Furthermore, when they experience abuse, these children do not receive effective treatment to overcome their issues; therefore, bitter memories of abuse always remain with them. During marriage and sexual relationships, this abuse is reenacted.

Not only do they not derive pleasure from marriage and sexual relationships, but sexual intercourse becomes a traumatic experience in their lives, leading to marital incompatibility and the potential collapse of their marital life, as person B stated, 'I have been mentally, very, very, very damaged, I even say that it has affected my future.'

Leila, a 38-year-old woman, said:

When this happened to me, I told my mother, and she told my father, and the family found out. After I revealed the situation, my husband divorced me and gave in to the same abuser who was my cousin. Unfortunately, I lived a life of mistrust, high anger, hatred, vengeance, depression, and suicidal thoughts. I never experienced love and pleasure in a relationship. Despite my efforts to build love with him because I had a child with him, true love did not materialize.

According to Leila's account of her marriage, which resulted from sexual abuse and her parents' decision for a forced marriage with the same abuser from her childhood, every time she sees him, it triggers the memory of her abuse. In this narrative, due to the experience of sexual abuse, Leila does not receive a sense of security and trust from social networks such as her family. She also lacks trust in her current husband, and each sexual encounter in their marital relationship reminds her of the memory of sexual abuse, preventing her from experiencing pleasure in sexual relationships.

To free herself from her anger and resentment towards her husband, who, according to her, no longer played the role of a father to their children, Leila tried to eliminate the memory and create love and affection in their relationship, but it was ultimately futile. Her marriage was not based on choice, love, or affection but rather forced by her family to preserve their honour. The experience of childhood abuse and her negative perception of people, especially men, along with the forced marriage with the person who abused her in childhood, resulted in her feeling disgust and aversion towards marital life and sexual relationships. She even feels violated during sexual encounters.

Mrs. B, an active social worker in the field of social harms, talked about one of her clients who sought help due to problems in their marital relationship. She said:

The first person who molested her was her paternal cousin, who was of the same sex as her. She acted as a nurse for her mother, but she engaged in a sexual relationship with the girl herself and caused harm. For example, she would say, 'You have to do what I want,' or 'If you don't, I'll tell your dad who has hidden cameras and watches everything, and I'll make you do it.' Later, the nurse got married, but the girl still had anxiety and couldn't focus on her studies. She was subjected to abuse and was seen as aggressive, but no one understood that she was a victim. People thought she was a mischievous and incompatible girl. After a

while, when she had difficulty with math and said her science was weak, they brought me in to work with her. Unfortunately, she told me that the nurse had also assaulted her, for example, taking her to a secluded place and satisfying herself in front of her when she was in the fourth and fifth grades. She satisfied herself and did other things, saying that was when she enjoyed it, and she did it for a long time. Later, she engaged in multiple relationships during her teenage years through different methods. But what bothered her the most was the impact of these events on her marital relationships.

From the above statements, it is clear that childhood sexual abuse has a significant impact on one's psychological interpretation of sexual pleasure and the frequency of sexual relationships. If this abuse is perpetrated by someone of the same sex, it can potentially influence the individual's same-sex inclinations and shape later life stages.

Precocious puberty

Precocious puberty³ refers to the premature appearance of physical and hormonal signs of puberty. This disorder can have various causes and, like any other unnatural phenomenon, will have consequences. Puberty usually begins in girls between the ages of 8 and 13 and in boys between the ages of 9 and 14.

³ Precocious puberty is defined as the development of secondary sexual characteristics before the age of 8 years in girls and 9 years in boys. This includes premature breast development, pubic/axillary hair growth, menstruation in girls, and enlarged testicles/penis, facial hair growth in boys. The age thresholds for defining precocious puberty have been revised over time due to the secular trend of earlier pubertal onset, especially in well-nourished urban populations. However, the standard clinical definition remains onset before ages 8 (girls) and 9 (boys) to distinguish it from a normal variant of "early" puberty that is a biological phenomenon. Precocious puberty can be further classified into central (GnRH-dependent) or peripheral (GnRH-independent) causes based on the underlying mechanisms. It can result from genetic factors, certain medical conditions, exposure to endocrine disruptors, or significant psychological stressors like childhood sexual abuse.

Doctors diagnose precocious puberty when, for unknown reasons, this natural process starts earlier than usual and is accompanied by bone growth and growth spurts. Precocious puberty is diagnosed in girls who show significant signs of puberty before the age of 8 and in boys who show significant signs before the age of 9. Approximately 1 child out of 5,000 is affected by precocious puberty.

Some children who experience sexual abuse can also be affected by precocious puberty, although precocious puberty has multiple factors and is not solely attributed to sexual abuse. Alongside the lack of sex education and learning sexual skills, precocious puberty can be harmful to children because, as mentioned in other contexts, it can lead them to learn sexual behaviours, engage in them, and suffer harm. When children experience sexual abuse, their sexual organs, emotions, and thoughts become entangled in these relationships, which can stimulate them and result in the experience of precocious puberty. Behnam Maghari, the director of the Behnam Maghari Children's Institute, said:

The worst thing that can happen to anyone and have a lifelong impact is sexual abuse of children because its consequences can lead to precocious puberty in children, which can bring about sexual addiction for them, and this can be very devastating.

From the above statements, it is evident that childhood sexual abuse can be a factor to trigger precocious puberty, which ultimately leads to multiple sexual relationships and sexual addiction. Sexual addiction has numerous psychological and social repercussions for the individual, affecting their social relationships, career, and overall lifestyle and social well-being. Like any other addiction, it progresses and relapses and can continue to impact and disrupt a person's life in various ways until the end of their life.

Mrs. S, a social activist, has spoken about her experience of sexual abuse and some of its chain consequences, including precocious puberty. She said:

I feel like my puberty started earlier because of that incident, and I felt that many things within me developed earlier than they should have, and my mind became preoccupied with things that we shouldn't have been concerned about at that age. Another problem was that I couldn't say 'no,' and my feelings started from the point where I thought I wasn't a good and pure person.

The above statements indicate that the victim's attitude towards themselves was negative, perceiving themselves as sinful and impure, unworthy of goodness. This self-devaluation and sense of worthlessness also give rise to self-doubt, low self-esteem, and deprecation of others. As a result of sexual abuse, they may experience various consequences that will disrupt their personal identity. They go through puberty and other related issues at a young age when they lack the necessary skills to cope with them. This, in turn, leads to other consequences such as the inability to say 'no,' lack of sexual knowledge, and so on. Mr. Khodai, a 38-year-old who was sexually abused by his uncle and a stranger, has talked about his experience of precocious puberty, saying:

I reached puberty a bit early, although I didn't think about it before. But yes, I reached puberty a little early, and I had such experiences myself, not towards others, of course. I didn't have a preference for boys; I was more interested in girls around me, not in terms of experiencing abuse or harassment, but I had an inclination towards them.

Sheida has mentioned:

Afterward, I became somewhat familiar with sexual issues, sometimes exploring them on my own, and I experienced the consequences of precocious puberty. It was very bitter. Then I started to like being with boys, and I always felt dependent on them.

The above statements indicate that precocious puberty in affected individuals is accompanied by a lack of skill in saying no and a sense of dependency, or these are the consequences and implications it leads to. The sense of dependency can form the emotional foundation of an individual and make their relationships with others clingy, which, stemming from their dependency, disrupts their balance in relationships with others and hinders opportunities for healthy and balanced relationships in their social life.

In social situations, individuals often experience relationships based on clinginess and lack of independence, depriving them of the opportunity for constructive, love-based relationships. Shida, like others, has experienced a number of issues such as precocious puberty, exposure to sexual behaviours, lack of self-control, or a tendency to be with boys, as the experience of abuse leads to precocious puberty. This means that when a child lacks the necessary skills to cope with it, they face various problems, which disrupts their personal system and can manifest in different ways. One of these manifestations is the inability to maintain control, leading the girls to develop a sense of dependency on men.

Precocious puberty is characterized by the appearance of physical and hormonal signs of puberty in girls before the age of 7 and in boys before the age of 9. It is widely believed that this causes these children to appear taller and larger than their peers, but in adulthood, due to precocious puberty, bone growth stops earlier than usual, resulting in shorter stature.

Psychological effects of precocious puberty cause children to be exposed to adolescence-related stresses at a very young age. They may have physical manifestations of puberty but lack sufficient experience. For example, girls may be subjected to sexual abuse with the onset of sexual signs of puberty, leading to fear and psychological problems. Precocious puberty is generally more common in girls than in boys. In some cases, significant central nervous system disorders can cause this condition. Sometimes the production of female hormones can also lead to precocious puberty.

Precocious puberty exposes children to adolescence-related stresses at a very early stage. When a child experiences precocious puberty, they desire to behave like adults, even though they have limited understanding of the adult world and environment. This sometimes leads to sexual abuse, and the guilt that follows becomes more distressing for the child than anything else. Therefore, it is important for the parents to establish a friendly relationship with the child.

Another issue is that if precocious puberty is not treated in a timely manner, it can lead to recurring anxiety, insecurities, and concerns in the child's life, immersing them in their own problems. In any case, precocious puberty is a dilemma because intellectually, the individual is in the same age group as their peers, but physically and in terms of instincts and desires, they feel older.

Precocious puberty may cause the individual to engage in relationships with peer groups that are not of their own age and exposes them to experiences or situations that do not correspond to their actual age, leading to the realization of damages and issues. The consequence of membership in these groups for an affected individual who experiences precocious puberty can pave the way for drug abuse, sexual addictions, promiscuity, some forms of homosexuality, and other issues.

The emergence of risky sexual and non-sexual behaviours

Sexual and non-sexual risky behaviours are another consequence of sexual harassment. However, these behaviours may not occur during childhood but rather later in life. Let's imagine a child living in a troubled and poor family in a socially disorganized neighbourhood. Their parents may be separated, and they may live with a step-parent or one of their parents. The poverty of the family leads to their needs not being adequately met, and the parents are unable to invest in the child's education and other skills. These families are often unable to socialize their children effectively and have ineffective parenting styles. Physical and psychological abuse is very common in these families. Apart from all these factors,

as previously shown, children in many cases experience sexual abuse by one of their parents or other family members.

They also often live in neighbourhoods where they witness and experience various forms of abnormalities. In these problematic neighbourhoods, the environment is well-prepared for the exploitation of these children. Due to poverty and the collapse of social networks - social networks being the main social capital - the conditions are favourable for the exploitation of these children, as their poverty and the collapse of social networks prevent them from controlling their neighbourhood. Wikström and Sampson refer to growth within the framework of quasi-general frameworks, which jeopardizes the moral development, executive functioning, and self-control capacity of children. These general frameworks are often experienced by children growing up away from the care of extended family members (Sampson & Wikström, 2003). Consequently, all of these factors, especially the experience of sexual abuse, influence a child's sexual behaviour. Social learning is the ultimate mechanism in this regard, which has been well expressed by the social learning paradigm and its mechanisms such as imitation, conditionalization, and the like. Furthermore, this theory has effectively linked macro-level social mechanisms such as poverty and micro-level learning mechanisms (Ekiz, 1998). Ms. Leila Arshad, a social worker at Khaneh Khorshid in Darvazeh Ghar neighbourhood, describes this process well:

Everything is interconnected. There is a cycle of poverty, dilapidated infrastructure, unemployment, social harms, and so on that has not been broken in this neighbourhood since the past. Now we have someone who sells their body for three generations due to the same poverty and reproduction of the cycle. Here, we have a 14-year-old girl whose mother became the wife of an ugly man. The girl started going out with boys to commit theft. Several times, they kidnapped her from this house and after a few days, returned her when she was pregnant. This girl was a runaway from home

herself, saying that she would do bad things so that they would catch me and take me to the correctional centre so that I could stay away from my mother and stepfather and not see them' or 'Child abuse, both physical and sexual, especially among girls, is very widespread [...]. Here, we have houses where boys go and are sexually abused and receive money [...]. Here, they give money to 8 or 9-year-old boys to fight, and they laugh' (Ghaderi, 2015: 106 and 112).

In the above statements, it is evident that a child who experiences abuse from their mother and stepfather is forced towards engaging in illegal activities because they live in a society where they lack support from social institutions and there is no social policy in place to change their lifestyle. They are compelled to engage in risky behaviours in order to seek refuge and security in correctional centres, which serve as children's prisons.

Moreover, there are certain neighbourhoods within this society where children, especially boys, may be exposed to environments that normalise or even encourage physical altercations and exaggerated conflicts, potentially for entertainment purposes or as a way of establishing social hierarchies. While the long-term impacts of such experiences are not fully understood, it is possible that children who grow up in these contexts could develop tendencies towards aggression or confrontational behaviour as a result of their social conditioning. However, it is important to note that individual experiences can vary greatly, and not all children in these neighbourhoods may necessarily adopt such patterns of behaviour throughout their lives.

During interviews with children and experts in this field, it was discovered that children, both in their childhood and later stages of life, learn sexual behaviours as a result of experiencing sexual abuse and other aforementioned issues. They may engage in risky sexual behaviours. Ms. Zarit Khah, an active advocate for children's rights, has mentioned the learning of sexual behaviours resulting from abuse, stating:

I created a private moment with him so that he would feel comfortable talking about this topic. He started touching his stomach, and I could see the excitement in his eyes. He hesitated and then asked if it was okay to touch his private parts. I became certain of what had happened. I asked, 'What?' He said, 'Nobody should touch our private parts.' He pleaded with me. I asked, 'Why?' He said, 'I like it.' I asked, 'Has anyone touched your private parts?' He responded, 'No.' I asked him to be honest, saying, 'It stays between us. I won't tell anyone.' Then he said, 'My mom.'

Ms. J, who had experienced abuse from various individuals, including her stepbrother, shares:

[...] After that incident, a whole new perspective emerged within me, and I realized I was different from others in many ways. I believe my awareness of sexual matters developed after those events. Now, I think I am dead and devoid of energy.

The person in the continuation statement says:

Even after my brother did it, I blamed myself and hid things around the house, like blankets, to see what he had done with them. I wanted to know what he had done to me.

In the above statements, there is a clear indication of the sense of differentiation and inclination towards self-gratification in sexually abused children. The sense of differentiation can hinder their integration into healthy social relationships, and self-gratification can lead to sexually risky behaviours for the abused individual. Ms. M, who was subjected to long-term abuse by her uncle, stated:

I always thought it was something normal and everyone was doing it. My mind was preoccupied with my cousin's genitals. When I turned 23 and got access

to the internet, the first thing I searched for was the largest genital organ. But what I had in mind was even bigger, and it wasn't until I reached the second year of middle school that I fully understood it when I saw every man. I looked at all men, wondering where their genitals were, where they were located. Why weren't they visible? When I found out about it in middle school, my mind had already developed a habit of analysing men from the waist down. This anxiety, worthlessness, guilt, and stress increased within me. I remember going to the Imam Reza Shrine three times to ask for forgiveness because I felt like a sinner. I repented and asked for healing, feeling like a terrible person.

The above accounts demonstrate the learning of sexual behaviours as a result of experiencing sexual abuse. It is natural for any individual to learn about these behaviours at some point in their life, but the way they are learned due to abuse is not proper and can lead to risky behaviours among children. Consequently, these thoughts and behaviours may cause individuals to feel guilty, experience self-reproach and condemnation, and ultimately seek forgiveness and absolution from external forces. Similar to Ms. Mohaddes, who went to the Imam Reza Shrine three times to repent. It can be understood that children, as a result of such abuse and the learning of sexual behaviours, experience psychological tension and feelings of guilt in some cases. Seduction is another behaviour that indicates the learning of sexual matters. Ms. S, a teacher, said:

The consequences of abuse were self-gratification, which sometimes caused harm to her body. At the age of nine, it was something special. Seduction? Yes. Drawing and the clothes she wore were very important to her, how they appeared to men and boys outside. They would tell her what to wear to please them.

There is an apparent objectification and commodification of the self in sexually abused individuals, where this self-perception in relation to others is prominent, and there is a constant effort to manipulate the body to gain the approval of others. This self-control mechanism is reinforced and intensified.

Mrs. S, a social activist in the field of children, has stated:

She was spoiled and made a great effort to seduce men. The way this 10-year-old girl behaved with men was something that a 25-year-old woman might do. She was obsessed with her clothing and wanted to become a singer or an actress. In general, the sense of dignity that exists for girls at that age had disappeared for her.

The above statement indicates the sexually abused individual's inclination towards becoming an actor or singer as a result of the abuse. This mental preoccupation with being seen and the efforts made in that direction stem from feelings of inferiority, worthlessness, and internal powerlessness, likely rooted in the experience of sexual abuse. Children, at a certain age, after learning about sexual behaviours, start engaging in these types of behaviours, and self-gratification is one of them. A 50-year-old woman who experienced abuse by her husband in childhood says:

To be honest, I enjoyed it at that age, and I couldn't find the same pleasure with a man, so I turned to self-gratification. Have you talked to anyone about this experience? Yes, when I grew older, I had a boyfriend, and he said I wasn't a virgin. I asked if it was possible, and he said he hadn't been with anyone, and the woman who was my friend told me that it happened due to friction and that it wasn't a male organ.

Nahal, a 34-year-old psychologist, said:

The consequence was that it heightened my curiosity and made me more aware, and I had been engaging in

self-gratification for years, which my uncle had told me about. I didn't even know what the clitoris was for a while. I didn't know its name or that it belonged to a person and provided satisfaction, but I had been using that method that he described. I saw it in a movie, a woman was reading a book, and then she rubbed her legs together, and I had been doing the same thing for years.

The account provided by Nahal clearly demonstrates how she has learned inappropriate sexual behaviours as a result of abuse and how these behaviours have continued. A 42-year-old bank employee, in relation to her experience of abuse, the learning of sexual behaviours, and the need for relationships after the abuse, said:

[The abuser] was my father, and I didn't feel like something bad had happened to me. I felt like I received special attention at a young age, and I thought he could be my husband. When I separated from my father and got married, I felt like my first divorce was that I had never thought something bad had happened to me or that I had been violated. It was as if I was in love with my father, and he also loves me and does this with me.

Engaging in risky sexual behaviours or acts: Another consequence is sexual abuse. Mrs. B, regarding her reckless sexual behaviour, has stated:

It's interesting that now I had this recklessness in sex; it's not like they can all avoid it. Some of them are reckless and do something to you that is on the verge of abuse.

Mrs. J, at the age of 17, entered into a damaging sexual relationship. She met someone who promised to marry her, and they engaged in sexual relations where he would take her on his motorcycle outside the city and have sexual encounters with her. She said the following in this regard:

Another consequence was that I became familiar with sexual issues at a young age. For example, I learned self-gratification at the age of 8 and had my first period at the age of 9. I constantly felt a strong attraction towards people who were much older than me. If I was 10 years old, I felt like I was in love with a 25-year-old person and had a sense of love and attraction towards myself. This led to a repetition of these experiences at the age of 17. For example, when I was in a situation of sexual abuse with someone, I went to see him, but when he made advances towards me, I didn't have the power to say no. Initially, I resisted, but I couldn't defend myself.

From the above accounts, it can be inferred that sexual abuse can lead to a cycle of risky sexual relationships for the abused individual. After experiencing abuse, emotions and desires awaken in the person, intensifying to the point where they may develop an attraction to older individuals and engage in sexual self-gratification. Ultimately, all these emotions and desires, which were shaped by the experience of sexual abuse, decrease the person's resistance to subsequent sexual assaults and even multiple sexual relationships in a noticeable way. It is likely that they will experience a series of unsuccessful relationships and further complicate their problems. In other words, the constructive and proactive agency is taken away from them, and they become more passively reactive. In fact, the childlike curiosity in children who have experienced sexual abuse is directed towards a tendency to engage in multiple sexual relationships with various individuals.

In a narrative, the consequences of abuse, especially unsuccessful relationships, are well expressed:

If this had happened to me when I was 13, now I'm 33, which means it's been 20 years. I've experienced 20 years of bad feelings, disgust, repulsion, insecurity, bitter experiences, and unfulfilled loves one after another. There is no sense of well-being at all.

All the above narratives clearly demonstrate how this group of children, both willingly and unwillingly, engage in risky sexual behaviours. In some cases, like the case of Ms. M, revenge against parents and the experience of such behaviours have led to such actions. Ms. J, in her own way, sought to reclaim her sense of innocence, which further damaged her, and Ms. M's sister became addicted to sex. Another consequence is the inclination or tendency towards same-sex attraction, as Ms. R has stated:

Another thing that families often think is that boys, being the initiators in relationships, cannot be the victims of sexual abuse or be subjected to sexual harm. So they are free and can easily engage in such activities. It is believed that they are more exposed to sexual harm, and what happens to them in adulthood is more related to boys who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood, as they are more inclined towards same-sex attraction and same-sex desires.

A 33-year-old social worker has described her experience as follows:

Because I was severely damaged due to sexual abuse and had developed a strong aversion towards men, I didn't see any inclination to engage in relationships with the opposite sex within myself, and I lacked trust. However, I would use my attractiveness, especially for revenge against men. For example, when a situation arose and a man approached me to establish a connection and have a relationship, I would unconsciously engage in behaviours that I now recognize as seductive behaviours and manipulative tactics that would make him not just attracted to me, but obsessed with me. Sometimes I would realize his sexual arousal, but at that moment, I would respond with retaliatory words or actions that would completely turn him off. I never engaged in risky sexual

relationships with those individuals, though it was a dangerous temptation, but I would take revenge through these tactics. At that time, I was younger, and I wasn't aware of the consequences of my behaviour. Of course, part of it was intentional, and I enjoyed it. But now that I understand, I deeply regret it because I know why I was doing these reckless acts, and I blame myself.

The above statements suggest that childhood sexual abuse can have distinct impacts based on gender, while also having some shared consequences across genders. Specifically: For males, one potential effect of childhood sexual abuse is an increased likelihood of developing same-sex attractions later in life. For females, one possible consequence is a tendency to engage in multiple sexual relationships, which may stem from a desire for retribution or a distorted perception of intimacy.

The report highlights the issue of how these children, both consciously and unconsciously, engage in retaliatory behaviours, which can sometimes be dangerous. In some cases, behaviours like those mentioned above are carried out as a form of revenge against men, despite experiencing intensified feelings of guilt and remorse afterwards. However, after a period of time, they become aware of their actions, make efforts to rectify them, and move on.

The reasons that drive individuals towards risky sexual behaviours also have negative and irreparable consequences. People who lack sufficient knowledge about risky sexual relationships expose themselves to various risks and harms. Risky sexual behaviour can pave the way for various sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, which is why it should be avoided. Risky sexual relationships involve the possibility of injury and bleeding, either due to the non-use of condoms or their incorrect use. Concern about risky sexual relationships is not limited to AIDS; such behaviours increase the likelihood of transmitting any type of sexually transmitted disease.

In the fields of criminology, psychology, and sociology, there are numerous theories and research that address why humans

engage in risky and deviant behaviours that harm themselves. Two main paradigms in this area are the social control paradigm and the pressure paradigm. According to the first paradigm, risky behaviours such as criminality, running away from home, antisocial behaviours, and crime are the result of disruptions in social bonds and the controls derived from these bonds (Hirschi, 1969; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Controls, especially self-control, are capacities that develop within individuals as a result of effective care and socialization. If for any reason there is a disruption in these controls, it creates the conditions for engaging in risky behaviours. As mentioned, these types of behaviours are the result of parents' neglect of their children's well-being (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

The pressure paradigm focuses on the experience of various pressures, including the experience of abusive behaviours, in engaging in risky behaviours (Agnew, 2007). The experience of these pressures leads to negative emotions, and these negative emotions, in turn, lead to alternative behaviours such as running away from home. Children who experience sexual abuse often live in troubled families or disorganized neighbourhoods. These families not only fail to invest in the development of their children's skills but also engage in abusive behaviours toward their children. One of these abusive behaviours is the sexual abuse of children. The experience of sexual abuse weakens the sense of attachment to parents and others, leading to negative emotions and, consequently, alternative behaviours.

In this study, it was observed that some children who had experienced sexual abuse engaged in risky and harmful behaviours. One of these behaviours is running away from home. If we review the research on runaway behaviour, undoubtedly one of the reasons behind it is abuse in various forms. The author, who has had several years of experience working in the field of social harm, including working with runaway cases, has well observed that one of the most significant reasons for running away from home among children is abuse. It should be noted that when the home environment is no longer safe for children and they experience

various abusive events such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse without access to support networks, they are forced to flee. A psychologist at the Women's Harm Reduction Centre described one of her clients as follows:

Yeah, one of the clients here, her parents divorced, and her father remarried her aunt. Every time she would tell her aunt that her father was doing this, her aunt wouldn't believe her. Their argument was that she was deeply in love with her father. She endured years of abuse from her father and brothers and eventually ran away and came to Tehran, where she ended up becoming a sex worker.

A social worker described the case of one of the clients as follows:

And the bad touch, the one with a sexual nature, she experienced it during her childhood. This girl runs away from school in fourth or fifth grade because of the harassment and abuse she was subjected to by a lady. She is taken to a house and sold there, and she is sexually assaulted. When she sees someone trusting her on the street, she goes with them to other strange houses, socially problematic houses. Then, after a while, she escapes and goes to the welfare organization. Then, she is transferred from one welfare centre to another until her grandmother finds her from the welfare organization and brings her to us. It's not the same place as before, but she has been with me for four years now. She was still in that house when she realized the sexual assault, all kinds of anal intercourse and...? How long does she stay in that house, and then she escapes from there herself? She was practically imprisoned. Yes, she had nowhere to go, no place. She had her child with her.

The two narratives above clearly demonstrate how the experience of sexual abuse in the absence of a protective system leads to running away, and how running away results in a wider range of harmful behaviours, such as engaging in prostitution. In other words, we are faced with the fight-or-flight response, also known as the acute stress response, which was first introduced by Walter Cannon in the 1920s.

According to Cannon's theory, animals exhibit a response when their sympathetic nervous system is strongly activated by threats. Later, scientists discovered that the fight-or-flight response is part of the organism's coping mechanism to deal with stress. When we encounter a stimulus, our brain assesses the threatening nature of the situation based on sensory inputs and past experiences. In both of the above cases, we encountered the phenomenon of fleeing or escaping from a stressful situation, where both individuals, faced with acute stress caused by sexual abuse, saw fleeing as a solution to save their lives and chose to escape from their homes. The director of the Iranian AIDS Society said:

There were and still are many cases where girls run away from home because their brothers or fathers, mostly fathers, sexually assault them. Especially if you are in Tehran, like Varamin, Shahriar, or the number of child abuse cases in those areas, which is very, very high.

In this narrative, it is also evident that the experience of living in disorganized neighbourhoods and troubled families, as well as sexual abuse, has been one of the factors leading to running away from home among girls. The following case was described by a psychologist and clinic manager:

She was 20 years old; that is, until she was twenty, she was with her father. Now, why did she seek help? She had accepted that she was with her father and wanted to marry a guy she had met at university, but her father wouldn't accept it. He would say, 'You belong to me, and I can't give you to anyone else.' She came and

asked, 'What should I do?' I mean, a complete relationship? Completely complete. She hadn't become pregnant, right? No, she hadn't become pregnant, meaning at the age of sixteen? She had accepted the child because her home was a safe place, and she had no one else. Her mother wasn't there know. It was her father and the child. It was you who came to seek help? Yes. In all these years, you didn't tell anyone? No, she hadn't told anyone, and she would say that he threatened her, and he had come and said he wanted to run away and wouldn't let her get married. He said, 'Let's run away together.'

In this case, long-term sexual abuse of the child by the father has led to a sense of ownership by the father and has hindered her marriage. Therefore, as an alternative to escaping her father's control, she chose to marry the person she loved and run away from home. The next case was described by Ms. F, an expert in family counselling:

[...] Eventually, unfortunately, we saw Sara after a few years at a crossroad. Oh, so this is her again! Yes, she had run away from her uncle's house, and I don't know how they treated her, and every time I tried to contact her, her uncle's and father's numbers didn't answer anymore. This is the fate of these children. Oh, my God, they really don't receive any support.

In another case, they have narrated:

The aunt's husband takes advantage of this lady, removes her chastity and maintains a relationship with her for years, but eventually reaches a point where he no longer wants her. When she ends this relationship, the lady leaves her home and becomes a street girl.

The above narratives clearly demonstrate how the experience of sexual abuse and subsequent escape from home have led to

a wider range of risks, such as experiencing assault and prostitution. Children who escape as a result of abuse in their childhood, as well as in later years, experience a different spectrum of harms.

A significant part of society holds a negative view of runaway girls, meaning a girl who runs away from home due to family incompatibility and moral issues. When they run away from home, they become accessible targets for criminals who take advantage of them at the first opportunity. Additionally, due to the lack of support systems, including families with whom they can live, the negative perception of society toward them, and the lack of economic opportunities for work and income generation due to societal economic problems and discrimination against women in some cases, they may resort to prostitution to meet their daily expenses. However, engaging in prostitution is not solely driven by the need to cover living expenses; it can also occur after experiencing assault and various other traumatic events.

High-risk behaviours encompass a diverse range of actions, including criminal behaviours. Essentially, it should be noted that experiencing abuse and other factors related to abuse lead to a wide spectrum of risky behaviours. These behaviours can manifest in a chain or as a collection. Mrs. Mima has mentioned a case regarding the experience of abuse and criminal behaviours:

At the age of 5, she was taken in by a family as an adopted child, and she became a part of the family. Unfortunately, as she grew older, around the age of 9-10, she became a victim of brutal sexual abuse by her older brother, maybe five or six times. The nature of this relationship was so horrific, accompanied by beatings and violence, that it traumatized the girl and caused her to suffer from neurological and psychological problems. She received treatment and was taken away from this family. When she started to recover a little, she expressed her desire to return to the welfare system and informed them that she was not in

a good condition. However, when she was placed in the welfare system and investigated the family, the family denied the accusations. Ultimately, this girl became a criminal and engaged in various activities due to the damages she had suffered.

In this case, the abused child not only did not receive a sense of security and support from her family but also experienced sexual abuse. As a result, her perspective and feelings towards other people and society have changed, and her personality has transformed into an antisocial one.

Seeking refuge in drugs and subsequently developing addiction is another high-risk behaviour among this group of individuals. Regarding the experience of abuse and addiction, Farnaz has stated:

I said that even though I'm young, everyone says it's impossible. So it's only been a year and a half since I told a counsellor? Yeah, counselling, not support. I've been here for a year and a half with psychologists and such. What happened that you wanted to tell? It's about trust. I thought maybe that's what destroyed me, and really, most of my misfortune has always been because of it. My addiction and turning to drugs. I got married twice, and I can't forget, even now, I can't forget for the rest of my life.

Farnaz's experience clearly demonstrates how she has been affected by sexual abuse and has turned to addiction as a result. She explains that the experience of abuse has led to a wide range of risky behaviours and ultimately led to the destruction of her life.

A 33-year-old woman, a graduate in architecture, who has experienced various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse, from her father, vividly illustrates how the experience of abuse has led her to consume addictive pills, cigarettes, and alcohol:

For almost a year, my condition was so bad that I regularly went to psychologists and psychiatrists and consumed bags of pills just to be able to sleep. The tensions and relationships that I had witnessed for years were still in my mind, and I didn't feel safe, not even from my father.

She continues:

I was accused, and I thought, well, if I'm being accused, why not do it? I started going to parties, drinking, and smoking at the age of 18. I was underage when I started smoking. I became an alcoholic. Did you develop an addiction to alcohol? I was severely addicted. They rarely saw me at the orphanage. My style was such that the orphanage manager knew I consumed alcohol.

In these cases, sexual abuse can often lead to substance abuse among children. When children experience abuse, they are subjected to a range of negative emotions and psychological pressures. Lacking healthier coping mechanisms, they may turn to drugs, alcohol, and addictive substances as a means to alleviate these overwhelming pressures. While substance use may provide temporary relief from their distress, it ultimately creates a new set of problems in the form of addiction and other harmful consequences. In essence, their attempt to escape psychological pressures through substance use inadvertently leads them down a path of addiction.

Personal Consequences

Physical consequences

In some instances, there have been claims that sexual assault may be accompanied by certain physical injuries. According to a study, it has been suggested that the following physical injuries could potentially be linked to such cases: vaginal stenosis, genital injuries, eye injuries, physical injuries, loss of virginity, physical symptoms such as weakness, hemorrhoids,

and bleeding, fever and chills, headache and nausea, HPV, uterine cancer, palpitations, and some signs of physical injuries. However, it is important to approach these findings with caution and maintain a healthy dose of skepticism. Further investigation and concrete evidence would be necessary to establish a definitive connection between these injuries and instances of abuse.

In some cases, a child may lose their life due to the severity of physical injuries resulting from sexual abuse. Vaginismus is one of the consequences of sexual abuse, which refers to a disorder in which a person experiences excessive pain during sexual intercourse (in this case, sexual abuse and assault) and therefore fears engaging in sexual activities. Vaginismus is a medical term that describes the involuntary contraction of the muscles in the vaginal area during penetration. Individuals who suffer from this condition are unable to engage in sexual intercourse and always experience painful penetration. In this regard, therapists for adults from a psychological clinic have stated:

Another example is a woman who had vaginismus. Her husband also had his own problems, and they had visited several therapists without success. They had no intercourse. We investigated and realized that this won't be resolved with CBT and such. We started discussing it analytically, and I saw that this has depth. I'm using this example to say that neither this person nor her father nor anyone who listens would think that sexual abuse has happened. Initially, it can be said that it is emotional abuse, but it involves sexual aspects, and no one thinks that this child is being sexually abused. The child has been harmed sexually at the age of 5. In general, the situation is like this: I make a mistake on a street that is forbidden to enter, and the police comes and tells me to go the other way, and they fined me several times for entering the forbidden road. Do you call this sexual abuse? Yes, in various forms of sexual

abuse, when they are exposed by an adult, it makes the child ashamed. Bravo, Father, he never imagined that he was sexually abusing his child. He thought he was fooling the child into smearing the head of another person. The child never imagined that the father was abusing him, but unconsciously, we feel bad. Now put it in that classification, and imagine that in the road they were going, there was no police, and they were speeding, and now the police come and catch them. Well, to avoid the encounter, they hit him again with this technique. At least for 7-8 years, this lady had experiences. We saw one of the reasons for vaginismus in this lady. Now before penetration, we also have vaginismus, which is a body's reaction.

Mrs. S, who is a midwife and a specialist in women's health, has stated:

The cases referred to her were related to vaginismus. When she investigated them, she realized that sexual abuse in childhood was likely. These ladies introduced two cases of vaginismus to us and explained that one of these women had been sexually assaulted by her uncle at the age of 5, and this continued to manifest as vaginismus in adulthood.

One of the consequences is the physical damage to the child's sexual organs. It can be said that the child's sexual organs have not yet fully developed and are not ready for sexual intercourse. Furthermore, since sexual abuse and other forms of sexual assault involve force and lack of consent, they can cause serious physical harm to the child's body. Mrs. Sin, a social worker, has reported some of the physical consequences of sexual abuse in one case as follows:

The father had sexually assaulted the child, and the child had gone through a terrible situation and had been taken to the hospital. The intensity was so severe

that they had burned the child with a cigarette, and there were incidents that had caused damage to the rectum, requiring several surgeries. When we took the child and examined them, we found that there was immense pressure on their eyes, which had become dislocated. One eye was on the right side and the other on the left side. We took them to various places, and eventually, we realized that the pressure had been so intense that some of their visual brain pathways had been severed, and there was nothing that could be done. Their eyes still have a deviation, and they may possibly never see again.

Sexual abuse during childhood involves a form of body manipulation, which causes harm to various parts of the body, including the sexual organs. It occurs at a time when the child is in the stage of body and self-awareness, and they are subjected to manipulation, leaving not only physical and biological signs on their body but also leaving a deep emotional and psychological scar.

These physical signs constantly serve as reminders of the emotional and psychological trauma, carrying the burden within their mental and emotional state throughout their entire life. The body and mind are intertwined and inseparable in the context of child sexual abuse. While abuse leaves physical imprints on the body, it also leaves a burning mark on the psyche, each reminding the other and ultimately serving as manifestations of the inflicted harm. The traumatized body and soul act as a form of sign language and speech, expressing the trauma they have endured.

The director of the Mother and Child Department at the Taloo-e-Bineshanha Institute, discussing the physical consequences of a child who had experienced abuse during childhood, said:

The relationship with the step-father was so brutal that the girl's body and soul were harmed, and she became numb, weak, and frail. During that time, to avoid suspicion from other family members, when she was in

this state, he took her to the basement, where he violated her, hoping to restore her general well-being and appear normal among the rest of the family.

Sexual abuse, which often involves force, can cause damage to the sexual organs and result in bleeding. This happened to Amir. When he was sexually abused by his sports coach, his sexual organs were injured, causing bleeding. Amir also experienced severe anxiety and stress as a result of the abuse, leading to heart palpitations, for which he had to take medication.

It affected my self-confidence greatly, shattered my self-esteem, and I still suffer from severe anxiety. Five years after the incident, I experienced severe heart palpitations and had to take medication, which I still continue to take.

Samaneh, a doctoral student with a law office, described her experience of abuse and its physical consequences as follows:

Both vaginal and anal penetration occurred, resulting in bleeding. Afterwards, the man himself became scared and locked me in his shop. I was in great distress and had a fever and chills for three days. My mother understood what happened because I told her, and she was only 14 years older than me and didn't have an understanding of what had happened. I was afraid of my father's family, and because my mother didn't want them to know about the abuse, she either understood or didn't understand. She herself says she didn't understand because it has only been two years since I talked to my mother about this issue.'

Loss of virginity is another consequence of sexual abuse. In societies where virginity is highly valued for girls, losing it has negative implications. One of these consequences is the feeling of worthlessness. The child, believing that they have lost this valuable part of their sexual organ, no longer feels valued. They

also fear marriage because they believe they are no longer capable of getting married. Losing virginity creates fear and a sense of worthlessness in the individual. These fears and feelings of worthlessness are instilled by cultural norms, traditions, families, and society, which consider having an intact hymen as a woman's worth and losing it as a disgraceful event that invites ridicule, control, and lack of respect.

One of the abused individuals commented:

He destroyed my childhood, and I always had fear, fear of marriage, fear of others finding out.

Roya, a 39-year-old woman, described her experience as follows:

Well, I had a terrible feeling. A feeling that I couldn't get married. I couldn't wear a wedding dress. I couldn't proudly raise my mother's head. Why did he do this? Why did he come home in the first place? Why didn't he stop when I cried in pain? Why was he so indifferent? Why did he do that with his hand?

HPV (Human Papillomavirus) is another physical harm that children have faced. HPV is a group of common viruses that cause genital warts in both men and women and can lead to cervical and vaginal cancers in women. There are approximately 40 types of HPV known as sexually transmitted HPVs, which can cause genital warts. These viruses are usually transmitted through sexual contact, typically during vaginal or anal intercourse, from one person to another. HPV can also be transmitted through oral sex. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. Some types of genital HPVs have a higher risk of causing cancer, known as high-risk HPVs. In most cases, the immune system of an infected woman or man clears the HPV infection and prevents the virus from causing harm. However, in some individuals, a persistent infection can occur, leading to gradual changes in normal cells that may eventually result in precancerous or cancerous lesions. Cervical cancer, oral cancer, and anal cancer are some of the cancers associated with HPV.

Mrs. Mima described a range of physical consequences of sexual abuse, including HPV, as follows:

He took off my clothes, including my shirt and pants, and forced me to touch his genitals. He would ejaculate on my face, which made me disgusted by the smell, the smell of anything similar to semen and bleach. I would get terrible headaches and feel nauseous. Even until a few years ago, my voice would become silent from the smell. Then, he made me lie down on my back, and he would lie on top of me. That's how I contracted HPV. I have had this problem since I was 15, and even now, whenever I get nervous, the sore reopens. That was the beginning.

She talked about her sister's uterine cancer:

She got uterine cancer, and they had to remove her uterus. She has a lot of physical problems, and her mental state is not well. I went through some sessions, but I didn't continue. She was suffering from being a victim and being helpless. It's very high in her case, and she has been damaged. My mother didn't do anything, but my father never let her go, which made her get married early.

Child sexual abuse can even lead to the death of the victims, as they suffer irreparable damage. Mrs. Mima mentioned:

In their family, there were several daughters, and the stepfather started molesting the older sister. Apparently, when the mother and father got divorced, the mother remarried this man. On weekends, the children would go to that house, and there were several girls. The stepfather allowed himself to abuse one of them, starting with the older sister who entered a relationship with him. He violently assaulted her. The

older sister lost her life due to the pain and injuries inflicted upon her.

The above statements indicate that not only does sexual abuse signify the victim's harmed life and create disruption in their existence, but in some cases, it leads to death. If the victim survives, cause such serious, profound, and multidimensional damage that encompasses their entire life and all aspects of living.

Since sexual abuse occurs at the hands of close ones and significant individuals in one's life, particularly during childhood and adolescence when a person becomes entangled with life and the social world, its effects register on their body, mind, and psyche. It engulfs all dimensions of their being and freezes them in their state, essentially marking their very life and existence.

A 33-year-old social worker who had experienced sexual abuse in her childhood and its impact shared the following:

A lack of proper connection with my own body and ultimately resorting to breast surgery for beauty, which, in my opinion, wasn't particularly successful and perhaps unnecessary. But it was my perception of my body because I never had a proper connection with it. Also, having nervous eating for years, especially at 3 a.m., which definitely could be the time of my sexual abuse occurrence.

Child sexual abuse can lead to a disorder known as body dysmorphic disorder, which is a psychological condition where individuals become intensely concerned about an imaginary or minor flaw in their body and constantly think about it. This flaw is usually imaginary, or if there is an actual physical flaw, individuals with this disorder perceive it as significantly larger. Individuals with this disorder, like those with anorexia nervosa, have a distorted or unrealistic body image.

This disorder is also referred to by other names such as body dysmorphia, body dysmorphic disorder, or negative self-

perception disorder. It encompasses a general dissatisfaction with the body as a whole (such as constant thoughts about being overweight) and dissatisfaction with specific body parts such as breasts, buttocks, etc.

Individuals with body dysmorphic disorder feel ashamed of their physical imperfections and may always refer to themselves as ugly. They constantly contemplate plastic surgery to correct their flaw. This can lead to an addiction to body manipulation, which has its roots and foundation in the psychological and mental impact of experiencing sexual abuse. This is another consequence of child sexual abuse.

Mental and Behavioural Aspects

Development of incompatible paradigms

The subject of this discussion is the effect of becoming a victim of sexual abuse on the creation of initial incompatible paradigms. These paradigms are emotional and cognitive patterns of 'self-harm' that are formed at the early stages of growth and development in the mind and are repeated throughout life (Raisolsadati, 2015: 9). The term 'paradigm' is generally used as a structure, framework, template, etc., and is defined or applied. In the field of psychology, the cognition of a paradigm is considered as a framework that is formed in the real world based on experiences and helps individuals make sense of events, people, things, etc., they encounter. Furthermore, individuals' perceptions are mediated through paradigms, and their responses are found through paradigms. A paradigm is an abstract representation of the distinctive and differentiated features of an event. In other words, the overall representation of prominent elements of an event or incident is called a paradigm.

Many paradigms take shape in early life, continue their movement and direction, and impose themselves on other subsequent life experiences, even if they are not very useful. This is often referred to as 'cognitive coherence/compatibility,' which means maintaining a fixed perspective about oneself and others, even if that perspective is incorrect or distorted. According to this definition, a paradigm can be positive or

negative, compatible or incompatible, functional or dysfunctional, and can take shape in different stages of life. Youngs *et al.* believe that initial incompatible paradigms are emotional and cognitive patterns of self-harm that are formed at the early stages of growth and development in the mind and are repeated in the course of life. Some paradigms, especially those that are largely shaped as a result of adverse experiences in childhood, may become the core of personality disorders, milder cognitive impairments, and many chronic disorders (Youngs *et al.*, 2018).

Consider individuals who have been abandoned, abused, forgotten, or rejected in childhood. In adulthood, if (unconsciously) they perceive their current life events as similar to their traumatic childhood experiences, their paradigms are triggered. When paradigms are triggered, they experience intense negative emotions such as grief, shame, fear, or anger. However, not all paradigms are based on traumatic or abusive childhood events. In some individuals' minds, a dependency paradigm may emerge without experiencing traumatic childhood events due to being completely under the control and protection of parents during childhood. Nevertheless, although not all paradigms have roots in traumatic events, they all represent an unhealthy way of life. Most paradigms are the result of harmful experiences that individuals have constantly faced during their childhood and adolescence. The impact of these adverse experiences accumulates and leads to the formation of a completely incompatible paradigm. Paradigms also have dimensional states, meaning they differ from each other in terms of intensity and scope of activity in the mind. Generally, the more intense a paradigm is, the more negative emotions the individual experiences when the paradigm is triggered, and its activation in the mind lasts longer (Youngs *et al.*, 2018).

The root of the transformative development of incompatible paradigms lies in the unpleasant experiences of childhood. The earlier these paradigms emerge, the stronger they tend to be, and to a large extent, they are the dynamics of the child's mental world. Four categories of early life experiences accelerate the acquisition of these paradigms. The first

category of early life experiences involves unmet needs and unfortunate failures. This occurs when a child does not experience pleasant experiences. Patterns such as emotional deprivation or abandonment emerge due to deficiencies in the primary environment. In such an environment, stability, understanding, or love are absent. The second type of early life experiences that give rise to paradigms are experiencing harm and becoming a victim. In such situations, the child experiences harm or becomes a victim, and patterns such as mistrust, misconduct, shame, or vulnerability to harm form in their mind. The third type of experiences involves the problem of the child experiencing too much goodness. Parents work hard for the well-being and comfort of the child, while providing a balanced level of comfort and well-being is necessary for healthy growth. As a result of such experiences, patterns such as dependency, inadequacy, or entitlement/grandiosity develop in the minds of children. The fourth type is selective internalization or identification with significant individuals in life. The child selectively internalizes and identifies with the thoughts, emotions, experiences, and behaviours of their parents (Youngs *et al.*, 2018).

Sexual abuse falls under the second type of early experiences, which leads to the formation of paradigms such as mistrust, misconduct, inadequacy, shame, or vulnerability to harm in the individual's mind. However, it is not limited to these alone and requires further examination. For example, as a result of this abuse, negative emotions such as guilt and self-blame arise among them. In this regard, a socially active lady mentioned about the experience of abuse among a child and the development of entitlement and guilt patterns, saying:

[...] Their mother had a borderline personality and had cut their body with a knife. Then, they thought they deserved those knife wounds. Children never think they are being treated unjustly. If you have seen it, even after being beaten, the child goes back to their mother's arms because they quickly forget. Even in severe cases where the child has been stabbed by the mother repeatedly, it is still the same. The child does not

consider their mother guilty. They feel that whatever I see in children, whatever situation they face, they believe they deserve it themselves, and they even feel guilty. What I saw and about their being stabbed with a knife, it was [...] severe conscience torment due to the sin they committed, and [...] now they are eight years old, saying with tears and resentment, 'I didn't do anything, I was playing with a ball because the police and social services came and took them away.'

The individual who has experienced the abuse mentioned above has developed intense negative feelings within themselves, such as feelings of guilt and deserving the abuse. These feelings are not temporary and can persist within this group of children for a long time, shaping their interpretation of themselves and the world around them. In fact, a child or adolescent who has been subjected to sexual assault and abuse interprets their social world based on their dominant feeling, which is often guilt, blame, and self-condemnation. They are constantly burdened with internal conscience torment, which can deprive them of logical reasoning in various life situations in the following years. It perpetually leads to self-punishment in their relationships and essentially manifests as a constant victim and saviour, reproducing it socially. A senior expert in social work has stated about the consequences of abuse:

What I can say in general is that their sense of worth and self-esteem is harmed. Their perspective on the world is affected, and generally, when they see someone, cortisol is constantly secreted in them, and their limbic system is active, causing them to feel threatened. In fact, their parasympathetic state is active, and it makes them always be in a state of readiness. This constant state of readiness works to shape their brain in a different way and increases their susceptibility. Their tolerance threshold decreases, and they are harmed.

Ms. Nouri, a teacher, has reported:

The uncle undresses the child completely, but nothing happens to him from that perspective. This is considered abuse, and it has had a significant impact on his mind, and it took a long time for him to be able to speak about it.

The damage to their sense of worth and self-esteem and, consequently, the change in their perspective on the world and being in a state of readiness are types of initial maladaptive patterns that form as a result of abuse in these children. As a result, their trust in others is diminished, their emotional system overpowers their control system, and they are always on alert and responsive to any stimulus. In this regard, a doctor from Sahel Clinic said:

But regarding this gentleman [the abuser] who was a relative of his mother, he is extremely angry [the victim] and has done something so that after getting his diploma, he won't have the conditions to see him at all. Because they couldn't leave their home. He hasn't told anyone about this either, but he still can't enter any relationship, and he is always on alert. He can't connect with men at all. He has developed excessive distrust in this matter, and it is one of his problems.

A psychologist from the Yarigaran Pouyaye Darvazeh Ghar Institute said:

The first time I was in charge somewhere, and when they entrusted this child to me, they told me that this child is very afraid of his father. When I took him out for the first time because I was responsible for a place that I had to take him somewhere, he kept looking back at me. Of course, part of it was scaring others, so be careful not to be where your father is. The people around him were scared of him, but this fear was internalized within him.

This case is somewhat affected by phobia and a paradigm of anticipation. This issue has made them constantly worried. Another paradigm that arises as a result of neglecting the needs of the child and causing harm is the pattern of self-sacrifice. In the paradigm of self-sacrifice or martyrdom, a person selflessly sacrifices their own needs to meet the needs of others, even at the cost of disregarding their own desires. However, this paradigm can more precisely give the individual the roles of saviour and victim, always excessively supporting others and prioritizing their needs over their own concerns, without logical reasoning for this preference.

This stems from the individual's dependency, which is based on attachment to others. These attachment-based relationships that lead the individual to appear as a saviour and victim are associated with their negative emotions, including fear and shame, which have also arisen as a result of sexual abuse. In most situations, the individual lacks the skill of saying no to requests and needs due to the fear of losing others and the sense of shame they experience. Additionally, due to the attachment-based relationships, the individual appears in the role of a saviour and victim. These mechanisms appear one after another in the form of a cycle of individual actions and continue to reproduce.

A medical professional said about one of the affected individuals:

Now they have problems in a relationship with a boy who is very self-sacrificing, and exactly the same pattern of manipulation that this boy had used on them. They say they were satisfied in this relationship, but when we examined it together, we realized that they were being victimized just like before. Now they claim to be satisfied, but if someone forces them to do it four times a day, it is not normal. But how come you don't protest? It's true that you're afraid of losing, afraid of being abandoned, but it's the same thing. When I mentioned different types, did you feel pain at first? They said yes, now that you mention it, I felt pain

at first; it means that the previous problem in their life, which we investigated, is coming back here.

When individuals do not receive effective support from their relational systems in childhood and even experience various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse, they no longer feel secure and at peace with others, and their self-confidence and self-esteem are damaged. This leads them to gradually interpret the world in a different way, a world that is not safe and where they may be harmed by others at any moment. Depending on the type of trauma they experience and the type of relationships they establish with others, they develop different patterns. The above text indirectly refers to the development of some patterns as a result of trauma, although a more detailed examination of this subject requires separate and serious research. These patterns shape the future path and life of children, the type of relationships they establish with others, their work patterns and activities, and many other things, and even determine how they interpret everything around them.

Functional impairment: Every individual, at each stage of their life, has a series of functions that they need to perform. Based on the patterns that form in their mind and the emotions that are shaped by their experience of childhood and adolescence sexual abuse, they begin to interpret and make sense of social life situations. This interpretation and decoding lead to the creation of subsequent actions. These actions are perceived as the impaired individual's functions, encompassing various cognitive, executive, emotional, and social functions. For example, we expect children to play, be happy and healthy, go to school, succeed in their studies, pay attention to their surroundings, and establish connections with others. However, child abuse, especially sexual abuse, not only disrupts the effective performance of these functions during childhood but also creates significant disruptions in their later stages of life. For instance, some sexually abused children face major issues in their adult lives, including significant problems in their marital relationships, which ultimately lead to the collapse of their lives. In this context, functional impairment is

addressed with an emphasis on the childhood period, and in subsequent contexts, other life stages will be examined.

School absenteeism and academic decline are among the major impairments in children's functioning. When children experience abuse, especially from close relatives such as fathers or mothers, their attachment relationship and attachment system to insecurely become unsafe to others. Studies have also shown that weak or insecure attachment is associated with problems such as lack of communication with peers in later stages of life, aggression, poor school performance, and low self-esteem (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Marcus & Betzer, 1969; O'Connor, 1997; Schneider & Younger, 1996; Schoenkvist & Phillips, 2000; Sumi, 2000).

Other behavioural signs in these children include feelings of guilt, worthlessness, being incomplete and impure, self-blame, sleep disturbances and nightmares, isolation and withdrawal, intense crying and fear (e.g., crying or showing a reaction upon seeing someone resembling the abuser), indirect expression of sexual abuse through drawings, games, and fantasies, fear of places or objects related to sexual abuse, animal cruelty, self-harm, chronic pain, having thoughts of self-harm and suicide, complaining about physical illnesses (without finding a specific cause), repetitive touching of sexual organs, excessive and neglectful behaviours towards the body (e.g., avoiding mirrors and covering the body excessively), a strong inclination to avoid a specific person without apparent reason, provocative and seductive behaviour, lack of interest in participating in other children's games, addiction to alcohol and drugs (in adolescents), running away from home (in adolescents), inability to form successful emotional relationships with the opposite sex, intense feelings of shame and engagement in risky sexual relationships (Sattari & Khoshnevis, 2019). Mr. K, the school vice principal, provides an example where after a child experiences abuse from their aunt, he witnesses the child's school absenteeism and educational decline. He said the following about the consequences of abuse in this case:

I became withdrawn, isolated, and didn't even ask questions about my lessons. Did my academic performance decline? Yes. There was a decline in discipline and academic performance, and I tried to attend school less, and if I did come, it was because my parents forced me. Because one of the important factors for prevention is education in schools. I always blamed and still blame schools. School is not just about teaching four words: math, literature, geography. All aspects of a student's life in school should be examined because half of the day is spent in school.

In the above report, which was described by one of the school guardians, we can clearly see indications of the declining trajectory of a child who has experienced sexual abuse. This incident has put their daily life and activities under strain and has created new behavioural signs that were not present in the child before. Even the teacher and school deputy have noticed these changes: academic decline, repeated absences, and the child becoming withdrawn. These are the consequences of this issue. However, it is possible that the susceptibility and behavioural signs exhibited by children vary from one child to another. Ms. Sattari, the child and adolescent therapist, also considers educational decline as one of the signs of sexual abuse, which leads parents or other support networks to refer the child to a psychologist:

These disorders are diagnosed after the adolescent period because as the child grows older, they become more courageous to report. Sometimes, it takes up to three years to disclose the secret, and afterwards, the child may have a tendency to recount it. Regarding children, the initial signs are high anxiety, night terrors, and particularly academic decline, which becomes a reason to refer the child.

Similarly, the social worker at Khaneh Khorshid (Sun House) recognizes academic decline as one of the consequences of

child sexual abuse. In response to the question of whether there are signs of mental disorders in the affected individual, and what disorders they might be, the social worker said:

Yes, there are mental disorders such as mood disorders, involuntary urination, isolation, aggression, academic decline, fear, self-harm, feelings of guilt, obsession, etc.

Learning disorder and lack of concentration are also common problems among abused children. When children experience abuse, they may develop various psychological issues such as nail-biting, anxiety, fear, and depression. They may believe that their support networks or some of them are not only unsupportive but also perpetrators of abuse, which hinders their ability to concentrate and pay attention. This itself can be one of the mechanisms behind academic decline among them. Nowadays, lack of concentration and learning disorders in children are often considered strong indicators of hyperactivity in children, animal abuse, obsession, and self-harm. These factors have been observed in individuals addicted to drugs or sex during childhood and are considered worthy of further investigation and research.

A member of the Association for the Protection of Children's Rights has spoken about the signs of sexual abuse among children, saying:

They were clearly affected by sexual and physical abuse, and their learning progress was very slow. I had to spend hours teaching them. They would either cry or talk to me. I didn't try to get too close to them because I was of the opposite sex. Many of them were sometimes afraid, even of me writing something in their notebooks while standing close to their desks. However, they had severe learning disorders.

Dr Abhariyan is a university professor and the head of the rehabilitation department. In response to the question of which individuals primarily refer cases on this subject to you, he said:

Well, the reality is that no one specifically comes to me because of sexual abuse. They come to me to talk about it, not because my expertise is in sexology. However, during the interviews and assessments we conduct, certain issues are indirectly raised. There are two main scenarios: one is related to children who seek help due to learning difficulties, hyperactivity, autism, and similar disorders, which are typically present during their elementary school years and childhood. The other scenario involves individuals who seek help due to psychotic disorders, such as young people or adults with various problems, including different types of psychosis, severe obsessive-compulsive disorders, bipolar disorders, severe anxiety disorders, etc. When they come and we take their case history and evaluate them, we often find that childhood sexual abuse has been one of the significant factors.

In the above narrative, we are confronted with the fact that sexual abuse survivors may avoid remembering their experiences for years and may not even talk about them with anyone. Unfortunately, the consequences of such incidents manifest themselves in various ways on the individual. For example, a person may initially seek a psychologist due to depression or anxiety, but through further interviews and careful examination, or sometimes after several sessions of psychotherapy and the establishment of trust between the client and therapist, they may mention their experience of childhood sexual abuse and recount it. It rarely happens that an adult starts a process of psychotherapy solely because of a sexual abuse experience. However, it is worth mentioning that depression is often associated with many social issues and damages, including sexual abuse, addiction, self-harm, etc.

A 33-year-old woman, a graduate of architecture, stated:

I couldn't sleep, and I would lose all my focus during the day, even if it was for studying. The sexual feelings

in me awakened very early, around the age of seven or even earlier when I hadn't started school yet. The sexual feelings awakened in me very early.

This report includes a quote from someone who experienced abuse as a child. She talks about precocious puberty and the physical and psychological changes that occur when a person enters adulthood, which usually happens to every individual, but if this stage occurs earlier than the normal time for a child, their childhood world with all its playfulness and colourful aspects comes to an end earlier. Precocious puberty in children also has various other consequences, which are mentioned. In another section, she mentioned:

On the other hand, until the age of 24 or 25, I used tranquilizers, and they were sleep-inducing. My mother expected me to go to work at 8 o'clock. Those people thought I was addicted to drugs, whereas I had no focus at all due to the tranquilizers I took for my migraines and stress, and I had to sleep because the pills were sleep-inducing.

In this report, there is a quotation from the abused individual; it has come that for years he did not tell anything about his experience even to his closest family members and to improve his mental condition at an older age, he underwent treatment and was under medication and the medications caused disruption in his daily functioning and made him unable to attend his job but the family's ignorance about his medication intake created the suspicion of his using drugs and these types of judgments have put him under pressure. So sexual abuse has various issues both in childhood and in later periods for children. The above statements may be one of the reasons for the presence of some mentally ill patients in drug rehab camps in Iran. Ms. Kauff, who has a master's degree in women's studies and works in the field of children and women, also referred to the lack of focus in abused children:

Regarding children, the most important issue we see is lack of focus, which messes up their concentration and

whatever we want to tell them or whatever, their attention gets diverted and they cannot focus or concentrate on the lessons I teach as a teacher or educator at all. It is severely distracted and restless. That trauma that occurred has overshadowed this child's whole life and now their connection to reality when that moment happens for them may sometimes be cut off and they may get lost in that traumatic feeling and cut off and lose focus.

Disconnection from reality, which manifests as lack of focus, is evident in many harms, including sexually abused individuals, drug addicts, sex addicts... In other words, since reality for these people, due to their unpleasant experiences, has an ugly and distorted face, disconnection from it shows itself in the form of lack of focus, which will have very harmful effects in their social learning process in various fields of life.

Ms. F said about one of the functional disorders of an abused child:

The next issue he had was obsession and addiction to his work. He had gone into karate work and was a successful person in this field, meaning he had a great interest, and had severe contradictions, and said that even though I went into this field, I'm afraid of getting hit, that someone's hands or feet touch me. We were working on this issue for a while that I saw a fear of harm in it and that he had a strange obsession that he had to sleep and wake up at such an hour. He had to be very organized in his life. He had a severe addiction to karate to the extent that he had dedicated his whole life to individual practice and couldn't participate in competitions. He used to say that when I go to competitions I lose and was afraid these things of mine would be reminded. He also had a fear of relationships. He said I'm really afraid, I wanted to get engaged and

marry but said the only thing that scares me is the mirror when I get married.

The above statements are examples of the important effects and consequences of sexual abuse, which lead to the development of obsession, addictive behaviours, and repetitive actions in order to reduce the stress and anxiety resulting from the abuse experienced by the victim. The above narrative clearly demonstrates that sexual abuse has affected all aspects of the child's life. This child has been subjected to abuse by two of his neighbours who were approximately his age. Despite having many responsibilities in his life and dedicating all his energy to karate, this sport has not had any effect on his life. Obsessive or repetitive behaviours in the affected individual provide temporary relief, but the main problem still persists. 25-year-old Amir, who has been sexually assaulted by his sports coach, says:

The physical and mental problems I experience have been ongoing for years, and I no longer engage in sports or go to the club. The thing that provided solace for him was computer games, which he became heavily addicted to for a while.

Amir, who is 25 years old, was sexually abused by his sports coach during his childhood, and this issue has caused him to abandon his favourite sport, which was karate. The inability to establish effective relationships with family members, peer groups, and others is another consequence of sexual abuse. Mrs. Behoudi stated:

The child's behavioural problems in the kindergarten were evident, as he was very disobedient and had very poor social interactions with his teachers and other children. The child was incompatible with the environment and also with his mother.'

A social worker, Barooti, described the experience of one of the beneficiaries who escaped from home due to experiences of sexual abuse as follows:

She had experiences of inappropriate touch with sexual nature during her childhood. This girl escapes from school in the fourth and fifth grade because of the abuse and harassment she experienced. She is taken away by a woman and sold at home, and she is sexually assaulted.

Based on the above account, it can be noted that sometimes the home environment becomes so unsafe, cold, and unkind for the child that the child prefers to escape without realizing the consequences and suddenly finds himself in a cruel and merciless world outside the home, experiencing homelessness, chaos, and insecurity. Some of the consequences of abuse have such a significant impact on their functioning and life achievements that it affects the entire life of children in all stages of life, just as Mrs. Behboudi said about the consequences of abuse:

My whole life was destroyed. For years, I thought this was what life was like.

These consequences prevent children from coping with daily life tasks such as education and learning, and from establishing appropriate and effective relationships with others. The establishment of these relationships plays a significant role in success, happiness, and everything needed for life, which these children are deprived of. All of these factors contribute to the loss or destruction of their entire lives or a significant part of it.

Psychological and personality aspects

One of the consequences of child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, is the psychological issues that children faced during childhood and other stages of their lives. Numerous studies have shown a relationship between child abuse and psychological disorders. Women's response to sexual assault is often similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and as a result, it is referred to as sexual assault-related PTSD. Survivors of sexual assault may experience higher levels of PTSD compared to victims of other crimes, even when

accounting for the effects of violence and danger (Jenkins, 1995).

Research has indicated that individuals who have experienced sexual abuse are more likely to be affected by PTSD. PTSD is a collection of symptoms that occur in response to traumatic life events. Studies have consistently found a positive relationship between the severity of PTSD and a decline in memory performance. This association applies to overall memory functioning, autobiographical memory, and episodic memory. Furthermore, an increase in PTSD symptoms is associated with a decrease in memory specificity and broader memory impairments (Sarokhani & Moradi, 2016).

Studies by Naghvi *et al.* have demonstrated a significant difference in memory between abused and non-abused children. However, no differences were observed in intelligence and accuracy between the two groups. Kazemi's research showed that abused children and adolescents may experience depression, withdrawal, and suppressed anger. They may also face academic difficulties, struggle to make friends, and have lower levels of trust, leading to feelings of worthlessness and failure. In adolescence, they may exhibit antisocial behaviours such as delinquency, theft, running away from home, drug abuse, and school avoidance (Kazemi, 2005).

Additionally, the abused and non-abused groups differ in terms of antisocial behaviour, aggression, passive-aggressive behaviour, and drug dependence. These behaviours are more prevalent among abused girls. In the emotional dimension, the two groups generally differ in self-esteem, social acceptance, sense of well-being, mental efficiency, psychological aptitude, tolerance level, and the ability to establish stable relationships. However, they do not differ in terms of self-acceptance, social presence, people-orientation, progress through harmony, progress through independence, and responsibility (Taghavi *et al.*, 2004).

Studies in Iran have demonstrated various internalized and externalized problems in children who experience abuse. Researchers attribute a wide range of psychological, behavioural, and emotional issues to the disruptive family

environment (Mohammadkhani *et al.*, 2000). The findings of this study also indicate that abused children may experience a broad spectrum of mental health problems and symptoms, such as anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma, nightmares and sleep disorders, aggression, sadism, bipolar or borderline disorder, psychotic symptoms, self-harming behaviour, personality disorders, dissociative disorders, neurological problems, panic attacks, self-starvation, forgetfulness, isolation, and fear (Mohammadkhani *et al.*, 2000).

Depression is one of these disorders. Depression involves a mood state characterized by boredom, withdrawal from activities, lack of interest, and apathy, and it can significantly impact an individual's thoughts, behaviours, emotions, and well-being. Depressed individuals may experience feelings of unhappiness, anxiety, emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, shame, or restlessness. Dr Bahrami, speaking about one of his patients who experienced childhood sexual abuse, stated:

There is a 32-year-old female dentist who also had a history of abuse in her childhood. At what age? Approximately five to six years old. They were from one of those families where the mother had foreign origins, specifically from the Philippines, and they had frequent travels. They were friends with their friends. Why did they bring it up? Because they had a lot of anger towards their mother and experienced depression. Then their mother would say, 'I don't know what I did to make them so upset with me.'

From the above statements, it is evident that an individual who has experienced sexual abuse in childhood from caregivers who were negligent or irresponsible harbours hidden anger. This anger has had a lasting impact on their emotional relationships with those individuals throughout subsequent stages of life, making the process of repairing the relationship more challenging.

A woman, who was subjected to abuse by her uncle during childhood, says:

My entire life was destroyed. For years, I thought this was how life was supposed to be. Intense anxiety and severe depression plagued me until just three years ago.

A female clinic director specializing in neurology has discussed a spectrum of behavioural and psychological issues among these children, including anger and depression:

Some of them are currently experiencing deep depression or severe obsessions, which may be related to that incident. It's not necessarily a taboo anymore, and it has improved significantly. Usually, after three or four sessions, individuals are encouraged and they show much improvement. However, these taboos still exist, and the individual themselves often feel a sense of guilt, especially girls, although it has become increasingly prevalent among boys.

The above statements highlight the unique effects of childhood sexual abuse on males and females. Boys, who are often socialized to prioritize masculinity and self-esteem, may experience a stronger sense of guilt than girls. This guilt may contribute to the development of same-sex attraction in abused males, as it has been observed that individuals who have experienced sexual abuse may exhibit a preference for the opposite sex. A 33-year-old female counsellor has shared her experience from childhood:

Well, throughout various stages of my life, I have experienced depression. There were many dark and gloomy days. During my early adolescence, I went through a period of severe depression that lasted for about six months to a year. And then, from the age of 23 to 27, I endured intense depression that had a

profound impact on me. I feel like I lost the peak of my youth.

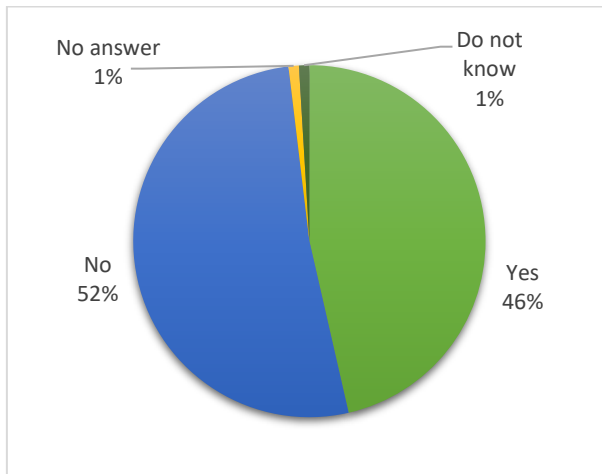


Figure 31 Childhood Experience of Ridicule by Adults (N=209)

Anxiety is another common disorder among abused children. Anxiety is a feeling of discomfort, worry, or tension that individuals experience in response to threatening or stressful situations. In another definition, anxiety can be described as a diffuse, unpleasant, and vague sense of fear and worry of unknown origin that affects an individual and includes uncertainty, restlessness, and physiological arousal. Amir, who experienced abuse from his sports coach, says:

It had a severe impact on my self-confidence and took away a lot of my self-esteem. I still suffer from intense anxiety, and five years after that incident, I started experiencing severe heart palpitations. I had to take medication for it, and I still do. My anxiety is overwhelming, and sometimes I completely break down.

A teacher from the outskirts of Tehran said:

He talked about one of the fifth-grade students who would constantly fall asleep in class and had a

significant decline in academic performance. There were moments when he would react strangely when the school bell rang, becoming extremely anxious and distressed. Sometimes, he would become so agitated and upset that he would quietly cry and be the last one to leave the classroom. I realized he didn't want to go home after school. When I tried to ask him about it, it was difficult to gain his trust because he was afraid.

Mrs. Movahed said:

I have always had stress, and now it's so constant that it has become a part of my permanent emotions and ingrained in my mind. I always have this feeling, whether it's happiness or sadness. Now I'm trying to control it, but it's more fear and anxiety.'

A 33-year-old woman who experienced harassment in a taxi during childhood shares her experience:

I was always anxious, even when someone would come and sit next to me.

Bipolar disorders or borderline disorders are common among abused children at different stages of their lives. Bipolar disorder is a mental disorder characterized by periods of depression, mania, and abnormal mood swings. As the name suggests, individuals with bipolar disorder experience severe mood fluctuations. These fluctuations typically last for weeks or months and are very different from what ordinary people experience in their daily lives. The three characteristics of individuals with bipolar disorder are:

- 1) Depressive mood: Intense feelings of sadness.
- 2) Manic mood: Excessive feelings of happiness and hopelessness.
- 3) Mixed mood: For example, a depressive mood accompanied by restlessness and excessive activity due to mania.

In fact, mood disorders that disrupt the stability of their moods, emotions, and behaviours can arise from internal conflicts, contradictions, and inner tensions, as mentioned before. Abused individuals, compared to others, have less stability in their emotions and behavioural balance, making their actions in social relationships less predictable and transparent. This factor, in turn, reduces trust in them by others. They also experience difficulties in social interactions and have decreased trust and empathy due to the effects of sexual abuse. Trust from others is reduced in their external and social relationships as well. From a sociological perspective, they have constructed a sense of abuse based on the experiences they have had, meaning that psychological and social factors are mutually intertwined. In this regard, Mrs. Mohtadi has mentioned about her sister:

I remember when my sister was being sexually abused, my mother found out, and it was my uncle and cousin who inflicted a lot of damage on my sister. Now, wherever they go, people label her as bipolar. She has been married three times and has always been involved in multiple relationships, and her situation is really bad.

Dr Hasani Abhariyan has stated:

Yes, they frequently experience anxiety and severe personality disorders, such as bipolar disorder. Borderline personality disorder is particularly common among them. We also see paranoia, and they tend to have a pessimistic outlook. There are various types of these disorders. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is also commonly observed.

The director of the Women's Harm Reduction Center said:

Most of them have borderline disorders, and they can develop psychosis during crises. They are prone to drug abuse, self-harm, and suicide.

They engage in self-harm and drug use as a means to cope with the experience of abuse. If we pay attention to the delusions caused by drug use and the fantasies and mindset associated with self-harm, we will find signs of protest against the abuse in all of them. These actions (drug use and self-harm) are forms of protest that require analysis and semiotics.

A social worker from the Athena Charity Institute said:

The traumatized individuals have a disorder resulting from the harm inflicted upon them, and bipolar disorder is very common based on my own experience.

Another common disorder among abused individuals is obsessive-compulsive disorder. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a mental disorder in which an individual experiences repetitive thoughts (obsessions) or feels the need to perform specific actions (compulsions) to the extent that it causes distress or impairs their overall functioning. The individual is unable to control these obsessions and compulsions for a significant period of time. According to DSM criteria, obsessive-compulsive disorder is defined in both cognitive and behavioural forms. Common behavioural obsessions include hand washing, counting objects, and checking if doors are locked. These obsessions can negatively impact the individual's daily life.

Regarding this disorder, Ms. Mimi talked about one of her clients and said:

She was 15 years old when she got married, but she couldn't engage in sexual intercourse with her husband. She said that whenever she attempted to have sexual intercourse, she would experience severe obsessive-compulsive behaviours and would isolate herself in the bathroom for a long time.

Ms. Bahrami stated:

[...] After engaging in masturbation, she would feel guilty, which led her to repeat certain behaviours such as washing her hands to feel clean. Her behaviour was

considered unusual and was diagnosed as an obsessive-compulsive disorder. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she believed that the guilt and isolation caused by the lockdown had contributed to her symptoms. However, upon further investigation, it was discovered that her sexual desires and anxieties were also affected by her genetic predispositions. She became more sexually active and expressed increased anxiety within her family.

Ms. FJ, a social worker, described the psychological issues of a girl who had been abused by her neighbour in the following way:

She had developed neurotic problems. She was trapped in a triangle of anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. She experienced severe anxiety and had compulsions related to washing. In adulthood, her obsessive and compulsive behaviours became severe to the point of causing significant distress. She also experienced intense and severe depression.

Self-harm and abuse behaviours are also common among these abused children. Self-harm, or masochism, is a type of mental disorder in which an individual derives satisfaction from harming themselves. These harms can be psychological and physical. It can be said that any intentional harm that a person inflicts upon their own body is referred to as self-injury, self-harm, self-damage. Similarly, abuse is a behaviour that causes harm and distress to others, and the abuser derives some form of pleasure from this harm.

However, it is essential to note, based on Freudian analysis, that a person who self-harms can also become an abuser in another situation, and this applies to sexual abuse victims as well. A sexually abused individual, as a victim, is subjected to harm and power by the abuser, but as previously mentioned, they can also, as a mechanism of compensation and due to emotions and issues influenced by the abuse they have

experienced, such as anger, disgust, envy, etc., inflict harm on others in their social relationships and be seen as sadistic and abusive. Dr Bahrami has described instances of abuse among abused individuals as follows:

See, all these problems have led to intense anger and a person with infinite hatred, unforgiveness, and intense jealousy, not having any connection with siblings or parents. In their relationships, they seem to have become masters of inflicting harm on individuals and the boys they engage with.

A mother of a sexual abuse survivor said:

After experiencing sexual abuse, my son would violently hit his younger brother for a long time, and I even witnessed him picking up a stick as if he wanted to penetrate his younger brother anally. I intervened and I remember when we used to go to the countryside, he would go after animals and torment them severely, inflicting terrible harm on them. Witnessing these incidents would deeply disturb me.

It is evident from the above statements that animal abuse can have its roots in childhood sexual abuse. However, similar experiences of harm and issues such as addiction can also be observed in the childhood of individuals under study. These connections between issues and harms demonstrate a thought-provoking relationship. A psychologist and director of the Yarigaran Pouyan Institute, regarding a case of self-harm, stated:

Well, I know another case. A girl who studied social work and is now a social worker herself. This girl used to expose herself to abuse and endured horrific violations. I don't know when the first instances of abuse began for her. She wasn't a child when she became familiar with me; she was a 22-23-year-old girl. When I use the word 'child,' it doesn't necessarily

mean a young child, but the first time she was violated, I don't know who it was, and later it seemed like she sought revenge from her own body, as if she put herself in danger. I remember she engaged in a very disturbing sexual act with her boyfriend, and one of her vertebrae was broken. She would willingly expose herself to people who...

A 33-year-old woman, graduated in architecture, said:

From that time on, my behaviour became more masculine. I would self-harm by breaking glass and shredding my hand into pieces, hoping my parents would notice, but they didn't pay attention. With bloodied hands, I approached them, and I will never forget it. The palms of my hands were covered in blood, torn apart into pieces. Even though there are still a couple of scars left, I regretted that action so much, but I had no way out. I fell in love with being masculine, speaking like a boy, becoming rough, and listening to aggressive music. I felt that this way I would become strong. However, I realized it had no impact. I was becoming rough, but it didn't attract attention from boys. They would say, 'She's one of the boys, let's hang out with her, we like her.' I received more attention. As a girl, I thought if I displayed masculine behaviour, my attractiveness would diminish, but at that age, 17-18, I received more attention.

The above statements indicate that the abused individual feels a sense of humiliation and self-deprecation towards their own sex, which stems from the experience of abuse. In an attempt to compensate for this and also to be seen more, they try to distance themselves from their own sex and portray themselves as a powerful sex, like men. This demonstrates that sexual abuse affects the individual's approach to their own sex. Although this impact is exacerbated by gender stereotypes

rooted in societal mentality, such as considering women as secondary and weak. Therefore, there are three factors involved in the inclination towards the opposite sex: feelings of humiliation and self-deprecation towards one's own sex due to the experience of sexual abuse, the desire to be seen, and gender stereotypes prevalent in societal mindset.

Nightmares are also a common problem among abused children. A nightmare is a bad dream that usually involves danger or threat. These dreams can be about a terrifying situation or involve scary subjects such as images of monsters, spirits, animals, or bad people. Nightmares in children are turbulent and frightening dreams that often cause them to wake up. Nightmares can evoke emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, shame, or disgust. In most cases, nightmares are a result of stressful or traumatic events that the child has experienced during the day. A 33-year-old architect, in various accounts, has described her nightmare problems in these words:

I felt tortured by the constant fear of taking a shower and being alone at home. I kept feeling that my father was going to do this to me again. I would stay awake all night, wanting to stay awake until morning because I felt that he was going to come to me anytime. Every time my father walked past my bedroom, my whole body trembled with fear. I had no peace whatsoever. It continued like this for years.

Mrs. B said:

My 18-year-old nephew invited Arman upstairs under the pretext of playing a computer game that Arman didn't have and he liked that game. After a while, his mother realizes that Arman is undergoing some changes in his disposition. He experiences increased nighttime fear, nightmares, and withdrawn behaviour.

She has talked about the consequences of the abuse she experienced from her nephew:

The consequences were significant. For example, initially, when he forced me and I was scared for a long time, I would have nightmares at night, and I became somewhat withdrawn. Afterward, I was very afraid that someone would find out and my reputation would be damaged.

Nightmares for abused individuals are like truthful dreams rooted in the reality of their lives, particularly the experience of abuse, which triggers and intensifies associated emotions.

Aggression is another common issue among some abused children. Aggression is typically defined by psychologists as 'any behaviour intended to cause harm to another person' (Fiske, 2004: 363) or 'any type of behaviour aimed at harming or hurting another living being that the individual intends to avoid' (Baron & Richardson, 1994: 7). Berkowitz defines aggression as any behaviour that intends to cause physical or psychological harm to another person (Berkowitz, 1993: 3). Aggressive acts can be physical or verbal and may be either physical or psychological in nature. The intent to cause harm or hurt is the primary component of aggression. A behaviour can be aggressive and result in actual harm or not, but to be considered aggressive, the intent to cause harm must exist. A behaviour that results in harming someone may not be considered aggressive if there is no intent to cause harm, such as unintentional behaviours. Fiske refers to the closest or most immediate intent in defining aggression. Researchers have identified two main forms of aggression: hostile aggression and instrumental aggression. Hostile aggression involves aggression that aims to cause direct harm or injury. This type of aggression, also known as impulsive or emotional aggression, is reactive and automatic. In instrumental aggression, causing harm to others is not the primary goal but rather a means to achieve other objectives. Similarly, instrumental aggression is often more controllable and premeditated (Fiske, 2004). Regarding aggression among abused children, a psychologist and director of the Yarigarane Pouyan Darvazeh Ghar Institute stated:

Yes, I must say that this child, who is two years old, has lived without any adult care and has spent two years sleeping on the streets, enduring all the seasons from spring to winter. He has managed to survive without any shelter, and now he is extremely angry. When he gets upset, he can become a violent child, to the point of endangering himself and others to the brink of death.

Samaneh, a 36-year-old law student, said:

When I was a child, due to the aggressiveness and fights we had, we used to go to a psychologist. I had a lot of anger towards my mother, and I thought she had abandoned me, and this event had happened to me. Before I came to terms with her, I despised my own body, and my unsuccessful marriage took place. I never looked at myself in the mirror. Maybe about two years ago was the first time I saw myself in the mirror. I couldn't see myself, and I always had a frown, hating people. I didn't look at anyone with friendship, and I wanted to hit everyone. I hated being touched and didn't let anyone hug me. Although I wanted to experience love and be embraced, it made me uncomfortable. No one had permission to touch me from behind, and it would affect my mood. I am still sensitive to touch, but I can touch some people. Some people, I have to approach them cautiously.

The above statements reflect the presence of anger due to the experience of abuse in the abused individual, which has led to aggressive behaviours. Additionally, the feeling of disgust combined with the need for validation is a conflicting emotion that manifests in abused individuals, and accordingly, they exhibit contradictory and imbalanced behaviours.

Ms. Vahedi, a teacher in some non-governmental organizations, has stated:

You can see aggression in children. Self-harm, for example, when they would cut themselves. Then there were behaviours that were not transparent, lies they would tell. Some would withdraw completely, some would lean towards mood swings, some towards depression, and they would isolate themselves. But most of them would lean towards that aggressive state and such behaviours.

Behaviours based on withdrawal and avoidance on one hand, and behaviours based on aggression and intense anger on the other, are dual reactions that are observed in individuals who have experienced sexual abuse. As mentioned by Marten, their behaviours either lean towards withdrawal and isolation or towards anger and aggression. As evident from the evidence and accounts mentioned above, abused children face multiple psychological and personality issues. If we take a systemic look at this issue, all elements of this system are interconnected. Many of these children live in chaotic and impoverished families. Their families face various problems, to the extent that there is a noticeable contradiction among them, which they transfer to their children.

On the other hand, they are unable to effectively socialize their children, their parenting styles are flawed, and violence against children is common in these families. The social integration and acceptance issues of these children within their families stem from the family's lack of awareness and understanding of childhood and adolescent phenomena. All of these issues are sufficient for a child to face various psychological problems. Now, if we add any form of sexual abuse to this equation, the child will face even more serious psychological issues. Once again, the lack of an effective treatment system and the ability to receive proper treatment are added to this equation.

This is due to the absence of effective treatment systems in society and the lack of awareness and financial capability of these children and their families to access treatment, resulting in them rarely receiving effective treatment. The consequence is the persistence of problems and psychological issues in

different stages of life, which in turn have broader implications in their lives, leading the abused individual to believe that their entire life has been destroyed. Dr Setudegan, a psychotherapist, has aptly described the relationship between sexual abuse and subsequent issues such as psychological disorders as follows:

Since children have no understanding of sexual relationships, these incidents usually occur within families, relatives, friends, neighbours, sports coaches, and others. The first tragic consequences are the lack of trust in the outside world and the inability to express oneself, accompanied by feelings of fear, resulting in anxiety and dissociation. It can also lead to low self-confidence and a sense of guilt, shaping the formation of the inferiority complex in children who feel like victims. Unhealthy attachment behaviours driven by fear (the root of addiction) are also present. This sense of victimhood and the complex itself can have its own specific negative consequences from the beginning, which intensify over time, leading to problems such as anxiety, depression, feelings of guilt and shame, self-blame, eating disorders, addiction, physical concerns, cognitive and psychological conflicts that severely undermine self-confidence to the point of anxiety and panic.

The destructive effects of these behaviours, emotions, and thoughts in adulthood can manifest in sexual problems, relationship difficulties, post-traumatic stress disorder, unknown anger, and possibly other personality disorders or mental disorders. It should be noted that the occurrence of disorders can be due to the child's personality (genetic factors), empowerment training within the family, effective relationship skills training, and the environment, whether through family support or, unfortunately, the recurrence of the tragedy

(environmental factors), and ultimately psychological factors, which can vary in intensity and reduction of disorders through awareness, study, and treatment. A study conducted by the University of Birmingham in 2019 showed that children who have experienced child abuse or neglect are four times more likely to suffer from serious mental illnesses such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder.

Emotional experience: negative emotions and other aspects

Emotions play a significant role in human life, and due to their importance, they have become a subject of study in fields such as psychology and sociology. Human daily life is filled with pleasant and unpleasant emotions, which greatly influence our interactions with others and ourselves. The field of psychology has devoted serious attention to the concept of emotions. Within this field, various concepts that we collectively refer to as 'feeling and emotion' have been distinguished. The concepts used to study this aspect of human beings in psychology include emotion, feeling, mood, emotionalization, and others. Psychologists have identified the following elements to describe emotions:

- 1) a conscious mental state that can be experienced,
- 2) sensory perception of feelings such as warmth, pain, etc.,
- 3) emotional states like comfort, sadness, happiness, etc., and
- 4) beliefs, such as having an uncertain feeling about something or someone that cannot be confirmed or denied with clear evidence.

Thus, emotions are defined in psychology as the transmission of the stimulus effect from sensory receptors to the central nervous system, which can be objectively observed. This is something that is clearly observable and testable in animals and human infants. The process of emotion occurs in two stages: external or internal stimulation and the influence on a sensory organ, which is transmitted through the central

nervous system and gives rise to the feeling. Undoubtedly, it can be said that emotions always elicit a potential and observable response in a living organism. However, emotions cannot be equated with behaviour, but their effects can be observed in behaviour. From a purely psychological perspective, emotions can be considered as a primary and fundamental phenomenon only in relation to a central nervous pathway. Therefore, there will be different emotions corresponding to the number of neural pathways (Iravani & Khodapanahi, 2005).

From a sociological perspective, emotions are a missing link within the field of sociology, and paying attention to and observing them is highly important. Emotions are often studied because they are usually accompanied by conditions that lead individuals to take action, and their actions are tangible, concrete, and perceptible. However, since conditions always give rise to emotions in individuals, groups, or societies, and as a result, emotions prompt action, emotions serve as an intermediary and missing link because they are usually not the focus of study due to their cognitive and intangible nature. The emergence of the sociology of emotions has been groundbreaking because it specifically discusses emotions from a sociological standpoint and goes beyond purely psychological approaches to the study and analysis of emotions. In sociology, there are various definitions of emotions, but they converge on elements such as 1) evaluation of a stimulus or situational context, 2) changes in bodily or physiological sensations, 3) observable or inhibited displays of movements, and 4) a cultural label referring to specific combinations of one or more of the previous three elements. One definition states that an emotion is a 1) relatively short-lived evaluative state that is 2) not fully under human control (Rabani Khorasgani & Kianpour, 2009: 8-36).

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give rise to emotions in individuals, groups, or societies, and as a result, emotions prompt action, emotions serve as an intermediary and missing link because they are usually not the focus of study due to their cognitive and intangible nature. The emergence of the sociology of emotions has been groundbreaking because it specifically discusses emotions from a sociological standpoint and goes beyond purely psychological approaches to the study and analysis of emotions. In sociology, there are various definitions of emotions, but they converge on elements such as 1) evaluation of a stimulus or situational context, 2) changes in bodily or physiological sensations, 3) observable or inhibited displays of movements, and 4) a cultural label referring to specific combinations of one or more of the previous three elements. One definition states that an emotion is a 1) relatively short-lived evaluative state that is 2) not fully under human control (Rabani Khorasani & Kianpour, 2009: 8-36).

Different classifications of emotions have been made. Based on one classification, some categorize emotions into primary and secondary emotions. According to this classification, emotions that are more fundamental than other emotions are considered primary emotions. For example, fear, anger, and joy are considered primary emotions and are even observable among animals. In another classification, emotions can be divided into pleasant and unpleasant categories. Emotions such as hope, happiness, security, belongingness, love, and being loved are considered positive emotions, while emotions such as anger, hatred, guilt, shame, grief, and so on are considered negative emotions.

Plutchik (1980) proposed a model of eight basic emotions/affections in a bipolar form: joy versus sadness, anger versus fear, trust versus disgust, and surprise versus anticipation. In addition, his cyclical model creates a connection between the idea of an emotional wheel and a colour wheel. In other words, the basic emotions can also be expressed with different intensities, similar to colours. The emotions with moderate intensity, presented in the second circle, form the foundation and main concept of this theory. Furthermore, the eight primary emotions at a moderate level

can combine with each other to create various emotions. For example, love is a combination of joy and trust, while contempt and humiliation are a combination of anger and disgust. The emotions placed opposite each other on the wheel are contradictory. Additionally, emotions become stronger as they move closer to the centre of the wheel and weaker as they move away from the centre.

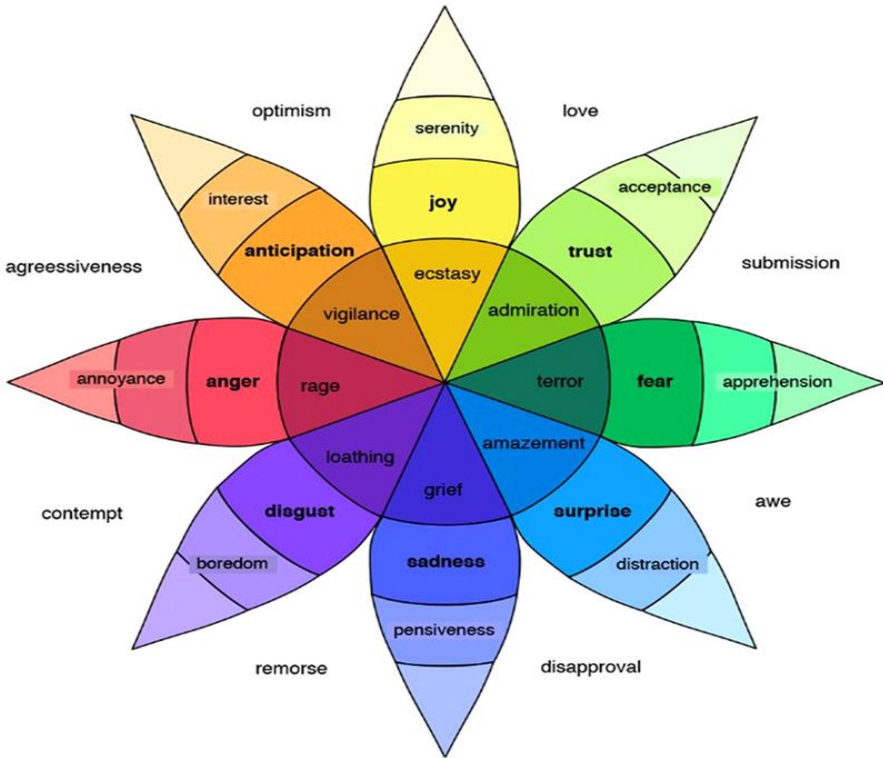


Figure 3-4. Plutchik’s Emotional Cycle.

The purpose of all this discussion about emotions and feelings is that children, as a result of experiencing abuse, go through a wide range of emotions, including unpleasant emotions, which have a significant impact on their lives both during the abuse and in subsequent stages of their lives. The important emotions identified in this study include fear, anger, self-blame, guilt, conscience torment, disgust, insecurity, experiencing a sense of violation in sexual relationships, entitlement, humiliation, rejection and isolation, loneliness,

concern, frustration, shame, disgust, fear, revenge, embarrassment, discomfort, surprise, helplessness and despair, grief, feeling tortured, withdrawal, feeling dirty or having a sense of unease, incapacity, hopelessness, pessimism, feeling like a victim, emotional dependency, despair, feeling at fault, ambiguity and confusion, feeling defeated, feeling worthless, feeling deserving of pity, envy, loss of feeling, and some other emotions such as the feeling of pleasure from being touched, having a sense of being a sexual service provider, having a sense of homosexuality, and feeling different from others. Some of these emotions are experienced at the time of abuse or in close proximity to it, while others persist for years, and some arise in later stages of life.

Generally, the emotions expressed by individuals who have experienced sexual abuse are situational and vary according to the context and the corresponding stimuli, and, of course, in some situations, they can express emotions in a combined, contradictory, or even inconsistent manner with the situation. Emotions such as fear, stress, anger, shame, guilt, pessimism, humiliation, rejection, victimhood, and denial, which are prominent in individuals who have experienced abuse, can be considered as core or central emotions. For example, the feeling of being violated by the abusive person in a marital relationship is one such case. Below is a narrative of each of these emotions.

Fear is one of these emotions. The director of a non-governmental organization, Maghari Institute, has spoken about the feeling of fear among one of the institute's beneficiaries, saying:

[...] For a long time, he has been greatly affected psychologically and emotionally, becoming weaker and thinner day by day, withdrawing into isolation, and experiencing night terrors.

One of the abuse survivors said in this regard:

I have a phobia of darkness, loneliness, and heights. If someone tightly grips my wrist, I lose control due to the intensity of fear.

A 35-year-old woman, as an abuse survivor, has stated:

I have always had stress, and now it is so persistent that it has become one of my constant emotions and ingrained in my mind. I always have this feeling and experience it both in times of joy and distress. I am currently trying to control it, but it is more about fear and anxiety.

A 33-year-old woman who had been sexually assaulted as a child inside a taxi associates her fear of getting into taxis with other situations. She recounts a time when she took a taxi to her grandfather's house and her mother came to ensure her safe ride. However, the driver made her uncomfortable in various ways, such as carrying a cigarette, which triggered her sensitivity to smoking. She noticed a mechanic's uniform and became anxious, praying to arrive at school quickly. Eventually, the driver confessed that he had intended to strike up a friendly conversation but realized she was scared. She gave him whatever small change she had and quickly got out of the taxi. This incident made her feel as if the fear she had experienced in the previous taxi or the previous taxi experience was manifesting itself again, creating a heightened fear. She describes herself as someone who is cautioned by her mother not to trust others and has this disposition. When asked if she experiences fear, she answers affirmatively, saying, 'Yes, I have fear. It's normal for a person to be fearful.'

The architect, who is currently 33 years old, has expressed:

Going to the bathroom and being alone at home became torment. I constantly felt like my father was repeating this behaviour with me. Nightmares kept me awake, and until morning, I would try to stay awake, fearing that my father would come over me any moment. The sound of him passing by my bedroom

would send shivers down my entire body. I had no peace at all, for years on end. Even now, at the age of 33, when my father has never repeated or will repeat such actions. There were one or two instances afterward when he forcibly kissed my lips, but those incidents did not recur. However, I could never find peace with that family.

Sheida, who had experienced harassment from her cousin, has spoken about the unpleasant emotions she felt, including fear:

Yes, it had many consequences. For instance, when he forced me against my will, I was terrified for a long time. I would have nightmares at night, and I became somewhat withdrawn. Afterwards, I was constantly afraid that someone would find out and my honour would be lost.

The response to a traumatic event varies among individuals, but there are common and fundamental symptoms. Emotional symptoms include sadness, anger, denial, shame, and fear. As evident in the above narratives, the experience of feeling fear has been a kind of response to the traumatic event.

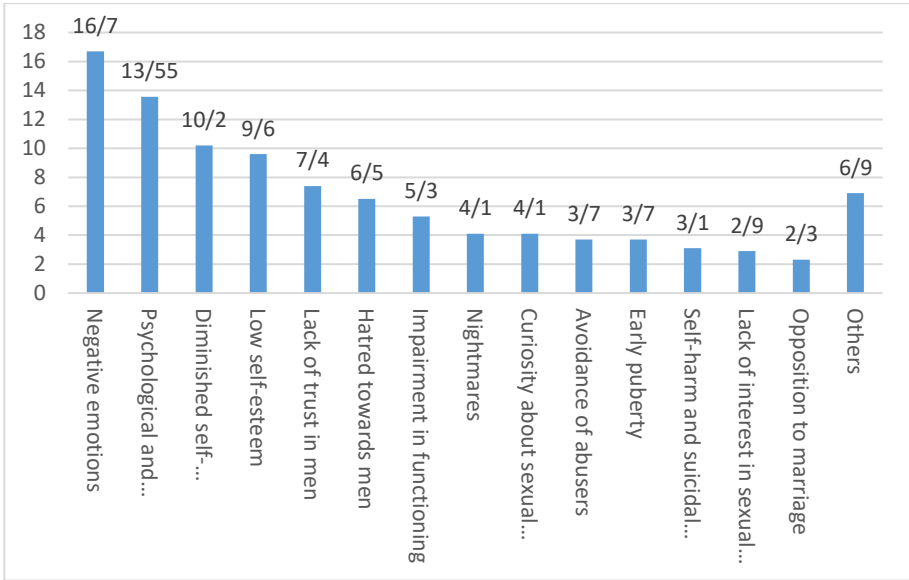


Figure 32 Psychological and behavioural changes following the experience of sexual harassment

Fear of sexual relationships and marriage is one of the consequences of experiencing sexual harassment. Mrs. Nouri, a teacher, spoke about one of the victims in several non-governmental organizations:

When she got married, she was extremely afraid of establishing intimate relationships and did not want to engage in sexual relations. She did not want to get married; she was afraid of her own father and did not want to marry any man. She was forced by her father’s coercion and abuse to marry a relative. The marriage ended in divorce, which was a lengthy process, and she does not want to get married again. Even after years of friendship, when I introduced her to a new case and suggested marriage, she refused. I told her to see a counsellor and discuss the issues she faced in her previous life. Finally, she admitted to me that she has lost all hope in men and feels a sense of aversion towards them. Her father is also addicted, and she

takes care of all his expenses because she is the eldest daughter and carries the burden of the household. Despite her success, owning a house and a car, and being financially independent with a six-figure salary, she does not want to get married. She has everything she needs, but she does not desire marriage.

Mrs. F.R. also spoke about one of her clients:

She had a fear of relationships as well. She said, 'I am very scared. She wanted to get engaged and married, but she said the only thing that terrifies me is the mirror that reflects my marriage.'

Marriage phobia or gamophobia is an irrational fear of making a commitment, giving and accepting the commitment to stay in a stable and honest relationship with another person for a lifetime. Gamophobia is a term used to describe unusual fears of commitment and marriage. To create a secure and intimate connection with a life partner, an individual must confront various fears and be willing to take emotional risks. Intimacy with another person involves sharing deep emotions and experiences. However, some individuals struggle or fear sharing their emotions with others. It is even possible for them to intentionally sabotage relationships or avoid getting close to someone they care about. One of the reasons for the fear of intimacy in individuals is having a history of physical or sexual abuse during childhood, which leads to the development of deep-seated fears. This fear manifests itself in adulthood in various forms, including the fear of intimacy. Self-blame is another negative emotion associated with it. In this regard, Farangis said:

Yeah, I said maybe I made a mistake. Maybe I'm really bad and messed up for them to do this to me.

A 33-year-old housewife said:

I thought maybe I did something that made it turn out this way. I thought maybe I made a move, yeah, I always doubted myself. I don't know why.

A 21-year-old woman, who is currently a student majoring in social work, talked about her feelings of guilt:

I felt like I was at fault, I mean, I had such a strong sense of guilt that I thought this man who is looking at me directly must believe I'm guilty, even though he took advantage of me.

A clinic director and therapist discussed the feelings of guilt of one of his clients:

They had a guilty conscience, and I would just tell them that it's not their fault at all, not to worry, and that they should go somewhere that can help them defend their rights. It was them who assaulted you, not something you did. Most of them had this same thought. It's having that sense of guilt.

Feeling shame is an emotional experience that causes a person to perceive themselves as flawed and unworthy, leading to sadness. The difference between this feeling and guilt is that guilt places the responsibility on oneself, making the individual believe that they did something wrong or had an undesirable behaviour. In this case, it mostly targets a specific behaviour or action rather than the entire personality and existential aspects of oneself. Feeling shame involves attacking one's own character, feeling unworthy and bad, becoming sad, feeling guilty, attacking one's own behaviour or actions, feeling negative, regretting one's behaviour and actions, being angry at oneself, among other things. Usually, when we feel shame about a certain issue, we also feel ashamed of our shame, which creates sorrow. The experience of feeling shame in this context differs from the general meaning of shame, which is often associated with embarrassment in our culture and is not considered the opposite of shamelessness. In society, feeling shame is seen as good and shamelessness as bad, but in this

context, feeling shame is defined as a negative emotion. Shame is the silent killer of interpersonal relationships and emotional connections, and this feeling is a subset of the feeling of sorrow. As can be inferred from the statements, the emotions experienced by an offended individual are not individually analysable. Instead, these emotions act as continuations and intensifiers of one another, occurring in a cycle. For example, the feeling of guilt and blame degrades the person's self-approach, leading to a sense of humiliation and worthlessness. Since a diminished self-esteem destroys one's dignity, it triggers a sense of shame, followed by denial and a feeling of sorrow. Fear and internal anger are the underlying foundations for all these emotions. These emotions are the result of the individual's experiences, specifically the experience of harm, and the consequences of these emotions are reflected in the person's behaviours in social relationships, life situations, and social events. This is an interconnected chain that has been observed and analysed in all the discourse so far. The clinic director of the neurology clinic has discussed anger among these individuals:

[...] They don't say it's natural and try to suppress it, or even if they do it, they feel guilty and say they couldn't control it and want to die. The second anger. Intense anger, severe irritability. Physical aggression and high levels of hatred. I've seen these two a lot. I'm depressed, but these two are the main ones.

Mrs. J has mentioned in various narratives about her feeling of anger:

Now, as I think about this person I'm recovering from, I have intense anger towards them, and one of my biggest wishes is for them to truly disappear. During the counselling process, she tried to neutralize its effects on me, but whenever I find myself in certain situations, my anger rises, just like now. I'm filled with anger right now, and no counsellor can solve this except by minimizing its effects.

The feeling of disgust is also a common emotion among those who have been harmed. The sources of this disgust include the perpetrator, the opposite sex in general, and self and child caregivers who have failed to adequately protect them. One of the victims said the following:

I hate everything, myself, my body, my father.

A 33-year-old architect, Ms. X, has stated:

What my father did activated my feeling of disgust towards my sister within me, and I see it in the eyes of my parents. When I was an 11-12-year-old girl, I witnessed the harm caused to my younger sister. Well, what kind of act is this? Don't you think you're creating a feeling of disgust towards that sister within me? Why does my father treat me like this just because you're laughing? In my later years, I wanted to kill my sister, so I threw her away from a place.

A 21-year-old social work student said:

Whenever he held my hand, he would squeeze it tightly, and I couldn't do anything about it. I had a strong feeling of disgust towards him. It happened multiple times, and he would hold my hand tightly. He might even kiss me, and it made me feel bad about it. It took years for me to tell my mother about it, and we had discussions throughout those years. The feeling of disgust, the sense of it being forbidden, and the fact that I had to hold his hand and kiss him out of respect, even though I wanted to quickly move away from him, caused me distress.

Leila, a 40-year-old who married the person who abused her, says:

Truly, now my whole being is filled with disgust, and this disgust prevents me from seeing many things. Disgust is really bad.

In another account, she expresses her fear and disgust towards men as follows:

You see, I really despise men. There are very few men with whom I feel comfortable, and I always feel fear from them. If I am in a confined space like an elevator with a man, my heart rate increases. I feel bad, and it's very rare for me to find people with whom I feel at ease. For example, even if my brother and I are alone at home, I feel scared. Even though nothing has happened with him, I'm afraid. I'm afraid of my own father. This is really bad, I don't like this feeling, but I'm disgusted and I can't stand it anymore. I feel repulsed.

Hatred or disgust is a form of emotion and the reactions experienced as a result of feeling hatred are always accompanied by unpleasant emotional states. In psychology, hatred is defined as a general feeling of disgust and a desire to free oneself from something contaminated, corrupt, etc., which has been described in the narratives of individuals who have been harmed. Mrs. Rasouli has spoken about the destruction of children's sense of security in cases of abuse by family members:

The closer that person is, the stronger the child's attachment becomes, and the more the child is harmed because they are supposed to provide safety for the child, to be there for them. But when the child witnesses harm, the primary feeling they experience is shock. It greatly disrupts the situation.

Mrs. Soltani, a teacher, said:

You see, it was like this: she was very sensitive, didn't talk much, and had certain manners that now when I

think about her manners, I realize that she felt that sense of security had not been established for her yet.

The feeling of contempt among men is more common due to the prevailing cultural attitudes that men should not be subjected to harassment or mistreatment because of their masculinity. In Iranian society, influenced by the mental stereotypes dominant in the cultural space, men are usually seen as symbols of power and masculinity. As a result, sexual harassment against women is more accepted, and these dominant beliefs in the social mindset have shaped men themselves as actors, instilling in them a sense of power and pride from childhood. This demonstrates the power of society in shaping minds. Consequently, if behaviour or actions contradict this mindset (such as sexual harassment against men), it evokes even stronger feelings of contempt.

It is interesting to note that the perpetuation of this social mindset works inversely in gender approaches to issues such as addiction. Generally, in the public perception, male addiction is more accepted than female addiction, and since addiction is considered a male issue and its sexual dimension is not widely recognized due to societal awareness, it is considered uglier for women and poses a dilemma for them. Therefore, women usually face different challenges in addiction compared to men. For example, according to their own accounts, women often engage in various risky behaviours such as leaving home and engaging in prostitution simply because they cannot and should not consume within their homes, as they are the female consumers and are more controlled by family and society.

In this context, one of the men who has been subjected to harassment has stated:

I was with my innocent friend outside the school in a semi-built structure when other kids, as if chasing us, surrounded us. The one leading them threw the first punch at me, and the others followed suit. They would say that I am a wrongdoer, that this is what I deserve, that they did this to me and that to me. Everyone was

humiliated and insulted, but it was mainly directed at me. It was like I was the perpetrator and I was the victim. This experience was very, very difficult. They would throw so many punches at me, insult me so much, and this became a part of my identity in that small town in Kurdistan. My name was associated with this issue, and it was very tough for me. Even in my teenage years, I was always humiliated because of it. It created a very unpleasant feeling for me whenever I went to any gathering or traditional social events like weddings. I was always afraid that people were talking about me or gossiping about me after I left.

The feeling of contempt means that a person believes they are smaller and less valuable than others, and they underestimate themselves. The complex of contempt is the opposite of self-confidence, and these two concepts are related to self-perception. The judgments that others have made about your appearance, abilities, and characteristics, especially during childhood, have created the perception that you are in a lower and weaker position compared to others. The feeling of frustration is closely related to the feeling of contempt; it is another one of these negative experiences.

In this regard, a 34-year-old housewife said:

It was a bad feeling, I felt frustrated.

The feeling of rejection and isolation is another common emotion among individuals who have experienced sexual harassment. Ms. J, a social worker at the Mehr-o-Mah Institute, in response to the question of whether signs of mental disorders have been identified in the affected individual, said:

Yes, definitely. Their anxiety is very abnormal. They become withdrawn, depressed, hunched over, and lose focus. They lose their appetite, have trouble sleeping.

The feeling of rejection is an internal emotional state in which individuals experience a sense of abandonment, undesirability, insecurity, or being dismissed. fMRI studies conducted on the brain have shown that the same areas of the brain that are activated during physical pain are also activated during experiences of rejection. This indicates the difficult and painful nature of rejection in humans. This negative feeling can even be experienced when losing objects. According to research conducted at the University of Kentucky, the feeling of rejection has a direct relationship with depression and anxiety. Mr. Eftekhari, the school principal, said about one of the students:

He was quiet, withdrawn. He didn't show himself much in the group and was generally upset. Their self-confidence is greatly affected.

Mr. Kari, the school deputy, said about another student:

They would become withdrawn, isolated, and wouldn't even ask questions about the lessons.

The feeling of loneliness, which often accompanies feelings of depression, is another consequence of harassment. However, it should be noted that feelings such as rejection, isolation, and loneliness often overlap significantly. In this regard, one of the affected individuals said:

I always felt lonely, and I became depressed.

Social withdrawal is a type of anxiety disorder in which an individual feels fear and often avoids places or situations that trigger their terror, creating a sense of being trapped, helpless, distant, or embarrassed. A 34-year-old man described the feeling of disgust, which is another common emotion among individuals who have experienced harassment, saying:

That feeling was really terrible when his semen got on my body. The feeling of disgust, the feeling of being taken advantage of and violated, it created a really

awful sensation in me, and that unpleasant feeling has stayed with me until now.

Disgust is an emotional feeling that is associated with the brain and is based on avoidance and caution. This feeling alerts us to stay away from threats. The reaction to disgust is rejection, and a person who experiences rejection may exhibit symptoms such as heart palpitations and nausea. The feeling of disgust can easily be identified by facial expressions. Nose wrinkling, downward mouth rotation, and eye squinting are facial expressions that occur as a result of disgust. Disgust helps us protect ourselves, and our five senses play an important role in activating this feeling within us. It is possible to experience intense disgust due to smelling, touching, tasting, seeing, or hearing.

Additionally, disgust can result from thinking about something, such as the idea that others might label us as bad because of a sensitivity we have. Past experiences that have activated the feeling of disgust in you can cause the same feeling to be activated in similar experiences. When the brain evaluates a previous experience, for example, if drinking tea has made you feel bad before, the mere thought of drinking it again is likely to activate the same feeling of aversion and disgust in you. Of course, the brain performs this function in order to protect us, and that is why, during disgust, the caution response is activated within us. The feeling of disgust, like excitement and happiness, can be triggered by certain odours, which are called odorants. However, emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, and surprise are not of the same nature.

The feeling of terror, which is often accompanied by a sense of fear, is another consequence of harassment. The origin of the feeling of terror has two factors. First, when children are subjected to sexual assault, they experience a sense of terror. The second source is derived from the awareness of others, meaning that individuals who have been harassed are always terrified that others will become aware of the situation. Ms. J stated the following about this:

When I was tricked into going inside the unfinished building to play, he attacked me. He pulled down my pants and put his genitals against my leg. I was terrified and crying.

Another person said:

I've always been terrified that others will become aware of this and it will ruin my reputation.

The feeling of shame is also another common emotion among victims of harassment. When they confront the perpetrator after the harassment, they often experience a sense of shame accompanied by a desire for revenge. If the perpetrator is someone familiar, especially a family member, the feeling of shame is much stronger. A 25-year-old woman who is currently married and works as a makeup artist said,

I used to feel ashamed and embarrassed that my daughter and my brother did this to me. It really bothered me to think why my own brother did this to me. I was very disturbed, but now it has improved a bit. It happened a while ago. I don't think about it anymore, but when I see my brother, it reminds me, although I never brought it up with him.

A 30-year-old woman talked about helplessness and deprivation, saying,

As a girl, I felt helpless, deprived, and weak, like I couldn't do anything.

Helplessness is among a group of common emotions and behaviours that most of us choose when faced with an undesirable relationship. The most common type of helplessness chosen is depression, but there are other options as well, such as withdrawal, grandiosity and complaint, madness or drug abuse. Additionally, other possible choices can include anxiety, fear, obsession, and physical illnesses. Feeling dirty or experiencing distress is another set of

emotions that accompany harassment. Many times, children have this feeling after experiencing harassment, saying:

I always feel dirty and distressed, even though I clean myself, I still have this feeling.

Fear of contamination and dirtiness is considered one of the types of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which is very common and perhaps the most recognized type of OCD by most people. To alleviate the anxiety caused by these constant and irrational thoughts, individuals engage in repetitive behaviours that may temporarily relieve the distress, but the cycle continues until proper treatment is received. Feelings of hopelessness, along with a sense of one's life being harmed and destroyed, are also prevalent among this group of individuals. Farnaz, who experienced harassment from her stepbrother, talks about a range of emotions:

A terrible feeling, a feeling of being broken. Being destroyed. The sense of hopelessness still lingers, the same shame I felt after two marriages.

When you saw your brother?

Yeah, it's still there, and this light should be off so I don't see my husband.

Is that feeling of shame and guilt?

Yeah.

A 33-year-old architect talks about the feeling of hopelessness:

Stress and tension have increased significantly within me, leading to a sense of hopelessness about my existence and even my own nature at home. If I exist, then why are my parents doing this? It has caused my personality to deteriorate. I feel lost.

Feeling like a victim is also a common emotion. Mrs. J said:

From middle school until now, I still feel its effects on myself because I was almost tormented during middle school and high school. I felt that I was treated

unjustly, and it led to a series of mistakes in my life that maybe I've only been indifferent to, but I might have sent them to the unconscious part of my mind.

A person who feels like a victim doesn't accept their role in events and always sees someone else as responsible for the events in their life. This means a decrease in personal power and authority. In fact, the role of a victim follows a pattern based on being saved. A person who feels like a victim cannot analyse their own role and the impact they have in everyday life and social relationships based on logic and rationality. Instead, they exhibit behaviours based on being saved, excessive support, and rescuing others, which sometimes leads to a sense of failure in their relationships. They also engage in avoidance behaviours in the victim role, meaning they attribute their responsibilities and roles in everyday life to someone else. In both the rescuer and avoidance states, the individual does not independently accept responsibility, role, and balance based on rationality. In fact, the victimized person often finds themselves entangled in a triangle in situations they experience due to the experience of harm, with the heads of this triangle being feelings of anger, the victim role, and behaviours based on being saved or avoidance, ultimately resulting in a sense of failure in the situations they experience in life. They continue to talk about feeling different from others and feeling disillusioned:

After this incident, a lot of sparks were lit within me, and I was pulled in a different direction entirely and realized that I'm different from others in many ways. I think my awareness of sexual issues took shape after those incidents. Now, I really think I am dead and devoid of energy.

A 34-year-old man who was deceived in childhood and received money in exchange for sexual abuse talks about self-selling and other emotions associated with this feeling:

Disgust, humiliation, shame, and the psychological effects that happened to me afterward can be described

as an event that occurred to me, and it was very difficult and in a way, it also had that accusation. Self-selling, or in colloquial terms, when a boy engages in sexual relations in exchange for money, which is degrading, I had given it legitimacy myself, and this has greatly troubled me throughout my life.

The feeling of revenge is also common among individuals who have been victimized. When asked about their feelings towards the perpetrator, they often mention feelings of hatred and revenge. Some individuals who have experienced significant harm, particularly of a sexual nature, feel that a substantial part of their lives has been influenced by the abuse, leading to a strong sense of revenge towards the perpetrators. However, those who have successfully undergone therapy have been able to overcome or forget these feelings of revenge.

The desire for revenge is not limited to the victims only. In some cases, individuals, especially children, seek revenge by inflicting harm on others. Therapists have stated that individuals may associate revenge and hatred with the experiences they had during childhood. Although they may not act on these feelings, they express their desire for revenge.

A counsellor named Bahrami states:

Recently, two people called me, expressing their desire to report their uncle. They want to file a complaint and demand compensation for the injustice they have suffered. Revenge has an improper connotation in relation to this person. He lost his wife to cancer, and he has a lot of anger, which is understandable. He should remain alone and endure his suffering.

One victim expressed their feelings of revenge in the following way:

Not everyone becomes pure by becoming a martyr. I haven't forgiven them.

Another person said:

I did this to my older cousin, and later, I felt a sense of revenge and engaged in a childlike sexual relationship with their sister (my cousin).

Having desires or feelings towards individuals of the same gender was another emotion experienced by some victims. In this regard M. G. stated:

My whole life turned upside down, and I became a misfit. I would harm everyone with my words, and sometimes I would remove the mask of the good girl and become a sinful girl in front of my father. For years, I thought I was homosexual and that I should have a relationship with someone of the same gender. Sometimes, these feelings come back to me, and I know where they come from.

The director of a children's Tolo Bineshanha Institute said:

Most of the boys who have experienced sexual abuse in childhood tend to explore homosexuality and same-sex relationships more frequently in adulthood.

Based on the above report, it can be interpreted that due to the harm they experienced from the opposite gender during their childhood and adolescence, they developed a fear of the opposite gender, lost trust in them, and were unable to establish intimate relationships with men. Consequently, they developed different sexual orientations and showed a greater inclination towards their same gender. The awakening of sexual feelings and emotional attachment is another consequence of abuse. In this regard, Mrs. J. Z. stated:

I constantly felt towards people, for example, when I was ten years old, I felt in love with a 25-year-old person and felt a type of love and attraction towards myself. This happened again when I was 17 years old, and for example, when that sexual abuse happened, I went with someone to see him, but when he made

advances towards me, I didn't have the power to say no. At first, I resisted, but I couldn't defend myself.

The feeling of differentiation or difference mentioned in the above statements is based on the labelling approach derived from sociological perspectives. When a victim is labelled by someone or others, gradually their social relations and their own mind are shaped by this label, indicating the power of society in constructing mental beliefs and the individual's attitude towards themselves. Thus, when a victim is labelled, they internalize and gradually accept that label on a belief level, moving and acting towards getting closer to that belief. Moreover, the confrontation with the opposite gender in a sexually abused individual can generate tendencies and inclinations based on same-sex attraction. Often, the consequences of sexual abuse that occurred in childhood will manifest upon reaching puberty, posing a significant challenge for children. Especially for children who have not received sex education or upbringing, they will be more influenced and experience greater concern and anxiety.

Finally, the 34-year-old gentleman who mentioned the feeling of being used in the above statements expressed the following about the psychological consequences of abuse:

It had significant psychological consequences. Now, this feeling of self-devaluation, this bad feeling that I had, well, at least in the first case, I didn't feel the repercussions as much as in the second case, which involved a man. But I truly felt broken within myself, that my pride that this bad feeling of being violated and taken advantage of, even though it was superficial, even though it didn't go further, even though it wasn't penetrative, it was to the extent that I described, but it really created a very, very bad feeling within me that stayed with me for years. It created feelings of fear, lack of self-confidence, and that feeling of being devalued, which I was later labelled with in the city,

and all of these things were very distressing to me psychologically.'

Also, in psychology, the discussion of emotional management, or in other words, emotions and feelings, is now raised. Mayer and Salovey (1997) defined emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize, utilize, understand, and manage emotions. Since the emergence of emotional intelligence, researchers and psychologists have examined its relationship with various aspects of life, such as academic performance, deviant behaviours, interpersonal relationships (Nasta & Sala, 2012), and marital relationship quality (Nils *et al.*, 2009). In addition, weakness in emotional intelligence leads individuals to psychological impairments, resulting in maladaptive behaviours and difficulties in communication with others (Yar Mohammadyan *et al.*, 2012).

In general, it is said that the level of 'intellectual capacity' is not the guarantee of individuals' long-term success in life; rather, other characteristics are necessary for establishing appropriate human relationships and achieving success in life, which is called emotional intelligence. Developing emotional intelligence can play an effective role in responsible and committed decision-making, effective participation and collaboration in work-related matters, and constructive role-playing in family and society, which are constantly evolving. Emotional intelligence is based on emotions and feelings, and individuals with higher emotional intelligence are less prone to depression, physically healthier, more capable of absorption and utilization in organizations, and better in terms of skills and communication in various situations (Akbarzadeh, 2001: 3-4).

The question is whether children who experience various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse and assault, have all their emotions and feelings involved for a long time, and there is almost no effective treatment available to them. Can they cope with daily functioning, expand secure or safe social relationships with others and society, have a constructive role in the community, and so on? Without a doubt, the answer to this question is no. They not only fail to manage their emotions

and feelings, but also, as a result of having these unpleasant emotions, they engage in behaviours that cause significant disruptions in their lives and harm themselves and others. Sometimes these consequences are so severe that, as some of them have stated, they feel that ‘their whole life’ has been destroyed. All of these refer to having the enjoyable experience of life, expanding effective relationships with others, and having a useful role in personal and social life.

Another emotion that children experience when being abused is the feeling of uniqueness. In fact, the feeling of uniqueness not only undermines the social bond of the abused person with others in social relationships, but also disconnects their connection with personal and social reality and their perception of them. A 42-year-old woman, a bank employee and an economics expert, has expressed her feelings about this emotion:

Regarding my relationship with my father, I felt that it should exist, and I had a special feeling about this because, in a way, I felt that I was a very important person because I was the centre of attention. It was like a feeling of uniqueness, not coercion. I felt attractive because I am attractive. [...] I felt that I received special attention at that age, and I thought this could be my spouse. When I separated from my father and got married, I felt that my first divorce was that I never thought I was experiencing a bad event or that I was subjected to abuse. It was as if I was in love with my father, and he loves me too, and he’s doing this with me.

Mrs. Rasouli, a social worker, said:

Unfortunately, when it comes to relationships with relatives and family members, this type of relationship is often repeated. One of the severe damages of these relationships is that it creates a lot of harm. In fact, it has many negative consequences. One of them is the expectation that the child has of their caregiver being

their supporter, but instead, they are causing harm to the child. This contradiction is so severe that the harm inflicted is extremely significant. The closer the person is to the child, the greater the child's dependency, and the more the child is distressed because they expect that person to make their world safe, to be there for them. But when the child experiences harm, the primary feeling they experience is shock. It greatly disrupts their situation.

Mrs. J. Z. said:

Well, you see, if I start from the age of 7, firstly, my experience was sexual abuse by my stepbrother, but you see, maybe that person isn't real, and I deny it and don't want to accept it.

In the above account, it is evident how the experience of abuse and the loss of innocence give rise to negative thoughts and feelings in the victim, such as impurity and self-blame. These lead the survivor to portray themselves as guilty for many years, affecting their relationships with others and instilling a sense of guilt in them. These consequences highlight the necessity of sex education and the provision of effective therapeutic services for children.

Chapter Four: Approaches to Addressing Sexual Violence

Introduction

This study focuses on the experiences of violence and sexual abuse in children. As previously mentioned, these forms of abuse encompass a wide range of behaviours. Perpetrators can include strangers at one end of the spectrum and family members or relatives at the other. In cases of abuse by strangers, it may arise from specific events or incidents without premeditation, and the frequency of such occurrences is typically minimal or non-repetitive. Conversely, abuse by acquaintances and relatives can be recurring over an extended period of time, spanning years.

Research findings suggests that multiple factors contribute to abuse, and abused children face diverse consequences of such harmful acts. The model outlined below presents the main findings of the research in a logical process. It serves as a conceptual framework for the study and highlights the most significant causes of child sexual abuse, including poverty and deprivation, dysfunctional families, ineffectiveness of institutions in providing sex education and support, lack of clear and transparent laws, and conflicts and contradictions within existing laws.

Poverty and deprivation are among the causes of abuse. It is not claimed that child sexual abuse exists solely among impoverished or deprived families or regions, but among these families and areas, the prevalence of child sexual abuse is higher. As the findings demonstrate, in certain cases, impoverished families (including households where both parents work) or a group of families living in close proximity, such as houses in impoverished neighbourhoods or shared living spaces, can provide a conducive environment for abuse. Moreover, impoverished families lacking sufficient resources

to invest in the development of their children's skills often fail to equip them with effective tools such as skills and awareness to defend themselves against hazards.

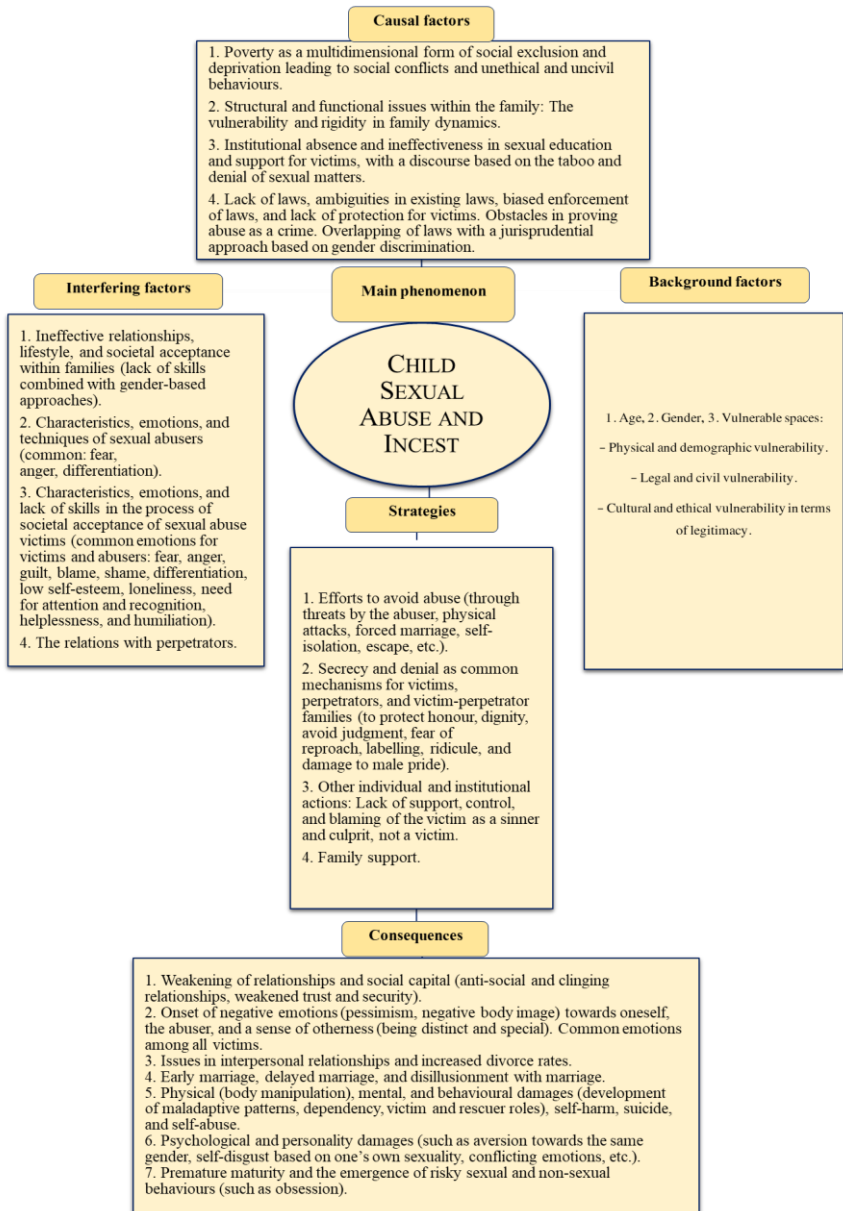


Figure 33 Grounded Theory Model of CSA

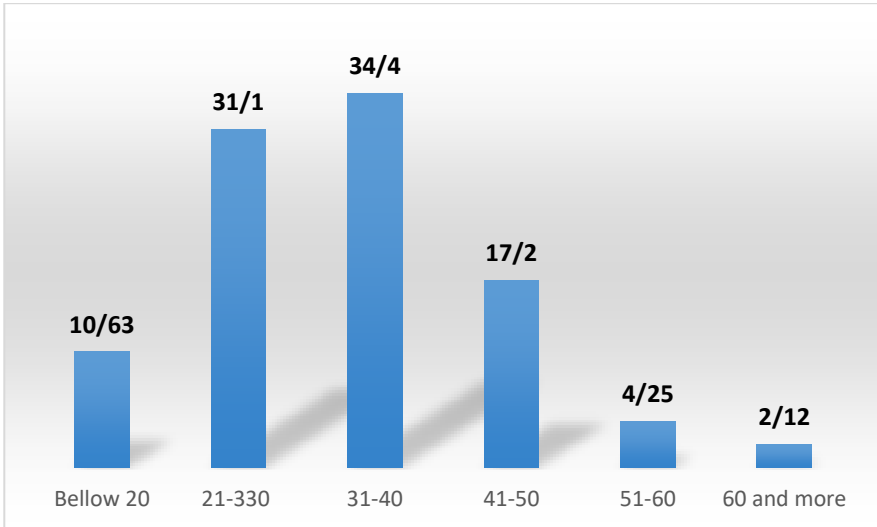


Figure 34 Frequency distribution of respondents according to age

Discussion Summary

The following is a summary of the analysis based on the interviews and quotes conducted in this study and the previous chapter. It is presented here in a cohesive manner and in the form of categorized headings to provide a clearer and more comprehensive understanding, review, reflection, and treatment of the issues and challenges related to child sexual abuse in Iranian society, derived from the results of this research.

From a historical perspective, domestic violence and abuse are reflections of class-based violence and indicate the position of women and their social status in that society. The position of men in the economic structure of the family and its reflection in the culture and traditions that designate men as the head of the household result in the *claimed* superiority of men over women. In such a situation, the existence of violence in response to the challenges and abnormalities present in society and the family is considered natural.

Many advocates for women's rights attribute the occurrence of honour killings, institutionalized violence, and abuse in society and families to factors such as patriarchy, religion, migration, restrictions, media, extreme biases, low levels of awareness,

clan-based and closed lifestyles in certain areas, forced marriages, and anti-women government laws. While these factors can significantly influence the occurrence of crimes and domestic violence, they are not the fundamental and underlying causes of these tragedies. The oppression of women emerged with the emergence of private ownership and class-based society. To eliminate it, a fundamental transformation of the socio-economic structure of a class-based society is required.

Sexual harassment in the process of social existence and social awareness in Iranian society

There is a reciprocal relationship between human awareness and their social existence. Human awareness is influenced by social existence. These relationships of interdependence are consistent with the relationships between the superstructure and the infrastructure in society as a whole. The determining factor is the economic infrastructure of society, which includes productive forces and productive relations, and the political and theoretical superstructure, values, norms, ideological justifications, and legal guarantees for the economic infrastructure and the ruling class.

This study indicates that the form and extent of social control by the responsible authorities of child and adolescent socialization, as well as their social awareness and responsibility towards these two groups in contemporary Iranian society, are worth considering. In a society where the level of social awareness is low, responsibility and control in the upbringing and socialization of children will be neglected by the most important responsible institution, which is the family institution. The foundation of social awareness is also social existence, and as long as the economic conditions are unstable and chaotic, the formation of civil and educational institutions responsible for raising awareness in society and promoting socialization will be undermined. Thus, there is always a reciprocal relationship between social reality and social mentality, which is the social existence and social awareness. Social awareness and social responsibility, which are dimensions of societal mentality, have not developed and

have been affected by the actual conditions of society, which is the current economic instability in Iranian society, leading to social control facing challenges and inefficiencies.

Neighbourhoods with higher levels of poverty and population density offer a more conducive environment for harassment. This is because there may be a lack of social control and accountability among caregivers, including parents and families, which creates a more vulnerable setting for harassment. This relationship between geographic and economic deprivation and cultural and social awareness deficits is well-documented in the context of sexual abuse.

In marginal areas, social monitoring and the level of cultural education are low, indicating cultural deprivation alongside economic deprivation in these areas, which has exposed individuals to risks in upbringing and social integration. With the intensification of economic issues and instabilities, more groups in society have been excluded and deprived of financial education, cultural and artistic opportunities, both in formal and informal education that contributes to their cultural development and social awareness. This has resulted in not only symbolic violence, as Bourdieu puts it, not only in formal education but in all dimensions of informal relations concerning lower and even middle classes of society.

Economic deprivation has functioned in parallel with educational and cultural deprivation (both in formal and informal structures), resulting in a lack of self-awareness and learning skills for these classes. In essence, their ability to live, the art of living, and active agency have been compromised, which is manifested in their lack of self-care and care for children and adolescents by themselves and the family institution. Additionally, low social control and support, or the failure and parallel functioning of support and social institutions, have created a form of social deprivation in these areas, which, alongside other dimensions of deprivation such as poverty, low supervision, and ineffective education, has exacerbated the prevalence of child abuse and harassment before their adolescence.

In fact, in the current marginal areas of Iran, social exclusion has taken the form of multidimensional deprivation, which, alongside conflicts and disparities existing in the population of these areas due to migration and cultural phenomena, has led to various social problems and damages, with one of the most significant being sexual abuse, especially concerning children and adolescents. Of course, there is always a meaningful relationship between these problems and damages that reinforce each other, and this is undeniable. One of the most important factors among them is poverty or economic deprivation and exclusion, which is the centre of various issues and damages with both economic and non-economic roots, reproducing problems such as addiction, divorce, theft, etc., all of which are significantly related to each other and to the domain of sexual abuse.

According to Avakian, economic forces, along with deep social and cultural changes and conflicts, have put significant pressure on affluent families and their relationships in various ways. Weakening and dismantling traditional and formerly stable forms, such as 'male vengeance' and paternalistic control over women, and the sense of 'losing masculine status' at home, workplace, and society, violence against women, including assault and group assault, in an attempt to regain superiority and masculine privileges and punish those who endanger these privileges, plays a significant role (Luta, 2021).

Bullies exploit various vulnerabilities such as poverty, emotional emptiness, lack of social connections, and a weak sense of belonging to manipulate and sexually abuse individuals, particularly targeting those with hopes and desires during childhood and adolescence. Regarding child poverty, it is evident that Iran's social policies have not effectively addressed the issue over the past decades. Instead of implementing strategies to alleviate child poverty, there has been a lack of commitment and abandonment of policies. A closer examination of the documents, policies, and implementation plans reveals a predominant focus on excluding impoverished children, particularly those who work or live on the streets, rather than integrating them into society and reestablishing their connections. The implemented

policies have mostly aimed at temporarily addressing these children for the purpose of improving the appearance of the city and gaining legitimacy, rather than tackling the underlying structural changes required to combat child poverty and the associated problems, such as the sexual abuse of these vulnerable children.

When delving into the phenomenon of social existence and awareness, Marxist perspectives shed light on the factors that shape an individual's development and potential. According to Marxists, the cultivation of creativity and capabilities is not solely dependent on individual desires but is deeply intertwined with the concrete social, economic, political, and material relations that individuals find themselves in. These relations extend beyond personal aspirations and are influenced by broader societal structures.

One crucial aspect of these social relations is the presence of gender-based inequalities and the objectification of women. Marxists emphasize that such inequalities are not inherent to human nature or biological differences but are rather established based on the distribution of property ownership rights. Throughout history, the division of labour and the emergence of private ownership have played a significant role in creating divisions and alienation between individuals and society at large. This division, often characterized by unequal power dynamics, has led to the objectification of women and the perpetuation of oppressive social norms.

To foster more egalitarian and humane relationships between men and women, Marxists argue that the abolition of private ownership of the means of production is imperative. By dismantling the capitalist system, which inherently prioritizes profit and capital accumulation over human well-being, it becomes possible to challenge and transform the existing power dynamics. This transformative process aims to eliminate the objectification and subjugation of women, allowing for the establishment of harmonious and equal relationships.

As long as individuals continue to interact in objectifying ways, conflicts and brutal confrontations will persist. Domestic

violence and sexual assault are among the distressing consequences of such objectification, as they reflect the power imbalances and oppressive structures ingrained in society. The capitalist system exacerbates these issues, as it prioritizes competition and individual gain, further eroding the potential for meaningful and respectful interactions.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that human alienation and its consequences are not inherent or permanent aspects of human history. Instead, they are products of historical and social constructs created by humans themselves. This realization opens up the possibility for change and transformation. By actively reshaping social relationships and engaging in transformative interactions, individuals have the power to dismantle oppressive structures and eliminate the objectification of women.

Addressing and eradicating violence and sexual assault requires a collective effort that challenges existing norms, structures, and power dynamics. Researchers and narrators have extensively documented the detrimental effects of treating women as objects and the urgent need to rectify this deep-rooted issue. By amplifying these voices and engaging in critical dialogue, society can sometimes work towards creating a more equitable and just future, free from violence and exploitation.

Inefficiencies in the legal structure for preventing sexual harassment and protecting victims

The inefficient legal structure regarding the prevention of sexual harassment and the protection of victims is intertwined with various factors and structures which require examination. These include the organizational structures involved in implementing these laws, which are essential and currently face diverse structural issues both internally and externally in Iranian society. These organizational issues hinder their effective and desired functioning in this domain. Internally, these structural issues can be exemplified by weaknesses in the rights and supportive benefits provided to their human resources, which affect their motivation. Additionally,

bureaucratic hurdles prevalent within the organizational environment pose challenges.

Externally, structural issues include parallel work and overlapping responsibilities between these organizations, as well as the resources and budgets allocated to them by the government to address these issues. Other contributing factors include societal and developmental issues. The discussion on social welfare policies, social security, healthcare, education, marginalization, and sexual matters, among others, is crucial. The more we observe the deficiencies and weaknesses in these foundational policies, the more we witness not only the exacerbation of sexual harassment and incestuous relationships within the institution of the family but also the ineffectiveness or diminished impact of relatively good laws enacted in this regard, along with the increasing challenges in their implementation.

However, what legitimizes the legal structure's failure to punish sexual harassment within the realm of incestuous relationships is a discourse based on gender discrimination that stems from a patriarchal culture dominant in society. Additionally, the economic discourse, through the conversion of punishment into monetary fines, in collaboration with the cultural discourse that regards the father as the owner of the child, suspends and exempts the legal discourse from the criminalization of sexual harassment. This suspension perpetuates and repeats instances of sexual harassment (incest) since preventive policies, from a legal perspective, are not considered through legal and judicial measures.

The result of these processes is the emergence of a person who, this time, is labelled as a legitimate victim of lawful incest within the same society that has contributed to its emergence through prevailing discourses. At this stage, the religious discourse, with the label of illegitimacy based on being born out of wedlock, deems their existence unlawful, thus rendering them devoid of rights and human dignity within the legal structure. Social and economic institutions, based on this deprivation, fail to provide social support and economic security through welfare policies, social security, and economic assistance. In fact, the phenomenon of illegitimate children,

which is a product of the culture and patriarchal relationships of society, is ostracized by these very relationships, and society does not assume any responsibility towards them, further legitimizing this lack of support.

This dysfunctional and ineffective cycle within the legal framework of sexual harassment continues in various forms. In fact, the legal discourse in line with the religious discourse in Iranian society does not differentiate or set boundaries between assault and adultery, using these two concepts interchangeably in terms of their meaning. Moreover, under the guise of adultery, punishment is imposed for assault and incestuous relationships. Therefore, Islamic conservative ideologies, which are institutionalized in current Iranian laws, act as an obstacle to the disclosure of assault. Consequently, the victim (the harassed individual) is transformed into the culprit, sinner, and criminal who should be punished by the authorities. This hinders the denial of assault by the victim and the non-disclosure of it.

The mechanism of denial occurs because, by disclosing the assault, the legal discourse not only fails to protect the victim from the assailant but also treats them as a criminal subject to punishment. Due to the dominance of this legal discourse and its enforcement through existing laws, the victim and their family prefer to engage in denial and non-disclosure. In a neighbourhood structure where social capital, including security, trust, honesty, and solidarity, is strong, a stronger collective spirit and cohesion will be created to support the victim, and with greater awareness and security, assistance will be provided.

To avoid errors and misconceptions about sexual assault, it is important to consider the following points: The perpetrator is not necessarily a violent person from lower social classes; rather, they can be socially respected individuals with high cultural capital, such as university-educated men, doctors, artists, or journalists, who exploit these qualities to commit sexual assault against women. There are also biases based on race and ethnicity, for example, in the United States, Black individuals and in Iran, Afghan immigrants are more likely to be accused of sexual assault compared to White individuals

and Iranians, even though perpetrators can come from any social class, race, or nationality.

The perpetrator is not always a stranger who attacks their victim like a predatory animal but can be someone familiar who abuses the trust of women to subject them to sexual violence. It can be a spouse who forces sexual relations against the woman's will. The perpetrator is not necessarily someone who lacks sexual opportunities and resorts to assaulting women who happen to be in their path. They can be married individuals or someone who has consensual sexual partners. This assumption, in fact, justifies the act of assault.

Sexual assault does not necessarily occur in unfamiliar places, remote areas, mountains, or deserts. It can happen in the victim's home, the perpetrator's home, universities, hospitals, workplaces, or any location where there is a lack of public scrutiny and control. The very nature of being away from social surveillance and the absence of witnesses make it difficult to prove and seek justice for sexual assault.

The presence of a woman in her home, workplace, or the perpetrator's territory does not imply her consent to sexual acts. Therefore, if sexual relations occur against a woman's will, regardless of the location, it is considered an act of assault, and the perpetrator should be held accountable, not the victim.

To legitimize and justify sexual assault, certain imaginary and false narratives are generated based on patriarchal assumptions about sexual relationships. These narratives claim that men are incapable of controlling their sexual needs, and it is women who need to be protected and restricted. There are also claims propagated through explicit sexual films that suggest women enjoy sexual acts accompanied by violence. These are baseless and invalid claims that serve to justify assault and absolve male perpetrators while victimizing women. Stereotypical beliefs and thinking patterns perpetuate silence around sexual assault, preventing victims from speaking out and seeking justice. These stereotypes need to be dismantled, and support should be provided to survivors. Perhaps by changing attitudes, this violent and damaging phenomenon can occur less frequently (Kazemi, 2017).

Barriers to sex education in preventing sexual abuse and its consequences

Preventing sexual abuse through sex education in Iranian society has been overlooked. This neglect and deficiency in recognizing the importance of sex education can be specific in the sense that Iran, as a religious society, legitimizes and values the lack of education in prevention by maintaining a discourse that sexual matters are taboo. On the other hand, it can be general, meaning that prevention is generally weak not only in the field of sexual issues but also in other social areas and matters.

Perhaps the reason for this is that individuals, institutions, and organizations in societies like Iran are more focused on promoting their own work and building their resumes rather than taking a functional approach to social issues. In their view, investing time, resources, and energy in prevention, which is time-consuming, is not cost-effective. As a result, the field of treatment in social issues is more emphasized and prioritized because it is both profitable and prestigious, although unfortunately, even the treatment aspect has been neglected in the sexual domain due to the denial of the problem and its acceptance. In fact, the religious discourse that portrays sexuality as taboo and denies it, with control over the legal, social, and cultural structures, suppresses sexual matters and eliminates the need for dialogue and education about them.

On the other hand, there is a common perception that sexual assault is committed by an uncivilized and unknown man in an unfamiliar place or during a violent attack and intrusion into a woman's living space. This image has led to the belief that when other men commit assault in different situations, their actions are not considered assault, and even if someone hears the details, they blame the woman for putting herself in the perpetrator's reach. Furthermore, there are often incorrect assumptions when dealing with victims, which make it difficult for women who do not fit those assumptions to be taken seriously and have their voices heard. For example, the notion that a victim must necessarily possess specific sexual attractiveness or wear certain types of clothing for the assault to be believable, which unfortunately leads to blaming and

attributing responsibility to the woman. What contributes to changing this image and bringing the issue of assault to light is the collection of data from assault victims. These data show, firstly, that assault remains largely hidden because it is linked to individuals' privacy and dignity, although it may have a much greater extent than what we know. Secondly, assault does not necessarily conform to the stereotypical perception that exists (Kazemi, 2017).

Various factors and multiple obstacles have contributed to the lack of timely and appropriate sex education for children, adolescents, and families in Iranian society. These factors include lack of expertise, taboos associated with religious beliefs and ideological management of society, mechanisms of denial and lack of transparency at all levels of society, institutional reluctance to engage with the issue, disagreements between proponents and opponents regarding awareness about this issue, and more.

Developing an educational program in the field of sexual issues for children, adolescents, and families requires a multidisciplinary perspective and involvement of experts from various fields. However, in Iranian society, some fields, including social sciences, are relatively marginalized compared to others, which hinders comprehensive and multidimensional approaches to sexual issues in policy-making and educational planning.

On the other hand, the dominant religious discourse in cultural and social policy-making, particularly in the realm of family policy, has always led to avoidance of addressing such issues by taboos. In a society like Iran, where social institutions such as family, school, media, and other communication channels are heavily involved in mechanisms of denial and lack of transparency, discussing sexual matters is strongly discouraged and considered a taboo, legitimized through religious discourse in these institutions, making it unauthorized to talk about them. This mechanism of denial or lack of transparency prevails throughout all layers of society.

Where denial is practiced, there follows encouragement and stimulation. Although sexual needs are natural, the social

mechanism of encouragement and stimulation has shaped the means and ways to fulfil them. This denial, based on the non-existence of the issue, eliminates the possibility of control and monitoring by society. Sex education requires interaction among institutions, each having its own involvement and contribution to this education. Family, school, and media as socializing institutions, on one hand, and religious institutions, governmental institutions, and other entities involved in policymaking, budget allocation, and legitimizing such education, on the other hand, play crucial roles in coordinating and enhancing the multidimensional aspects of these programs.

However, in Iranian society, institutional interactions have often been disrupted due to overlapping responsibilities, conflicts, and their negating approaches, which have led to dysfunctionality in their operations, and sex education has consistently been marginalized as a result.

Furthermore, the disagreement between proponents and opponents of sex education, each presenting their own reasons and arguments, is another significant barrier. Supporters consider raising awareness about sexual matters essential for personal and social well-being, emphasizing the acquisition of necessary life skills. Conversely, opponents perceive this education as a stimulus for arousing and encouraging instincts, which they believe can have negative consequences. In any case, these opposing views have resulted in the failure to achieve sex education in Iranian society and have always served as a serious obstacle. The combination of the aforementioned factors and other influences has contributed to the reluctance to address and plan for sex education in this regard.

According to the text of field interviews, one of the serious obstacles to sex education in Iranian society is the prevailing social emotions rooted in the culture of social acceptance and the process and form of social upbringing. Emotions such as shame, guilt, fear, etc., are dominant emotions that arise and become institutionalized in the social upbringing and during childhood and adolescence, even professionals and teachers in our society have these emotions, which is one of the main

obstacles to discussing sexual matters. Additionally, the mechanism of honour and social modesty is so deeply ingrained in our social and cultural layers that topics that require collective discussion are denied, which serves as a barrier to clear confrontation with them, and they are always considered taboo and denied.

Just as the obstacles to sex education in Iranian society are multifactorial and multidimensional, the issues and obstacles of non-governmental organizations in sex education are also multifactorial. One of these factors that non-governmental organizations are grappling with is the lack of familiarity and awareness of the public regarding these organizations and their functions, resulting from the low level of civil awareness among the people, which leads to their non-membership in these institutions and organizations, resulting in limited support and advocacy for them.

Another factor is the non-interactive relationship that these organizations and people's institutions have with other governmental and private institutions, which blocks effective action. The lack of sufficient knowledge and skills in the field of sexual issues among the human resources working in these organizations and other organizations related to this field indicates the lack of proper management, selection, control, and supervision, all of which are obstacles to their effectiveness in this field.

In other words, there are structural issues that have rendered the function of dedicated caregivers and human resources as ineffective social actors in dealing with sexual abuses. The most important of these structural issues is the lack of comprehensive and systematic education and awareness, as well as the absence of supportive institutions that can act strongly and interactively in this field. Education alone and institutional performance alone are not sufficient to address this issue in Iranian society. Moreover, regardless of addressing the structural and macro-level issues that encompass underlying factors, these two factors will not be executable and effective. The statements above indicate that the denial of abuse in the educational institution, along with the family institution and the media, has led to the

concealment of the issue, lack of follow-up, and the abdication of responsibility and negligence on the part of responsible institutions and individuals.

With the commercialization of the education system in Iranian society, both its main functions have been marginalized, and the relationship between school and family has undergone changes compared to before. The family is now seen as a customer that needs to be attracted in any way possible, and the educational functions of the school are no longer a priority independent of the family and without its intervention; they require validation from the family, even if the family is unaware.

On the other hand, the interaction between the family and the school has become purely symbolic and has disrupted the continuity of communication between the home and the school. Counsellors in schools mostly act as intermediaries to attract families and students as customers, rather than as individuals and institutions that have the function of providing awareness in various matters, including sex education. Due to this role-playing, their trust and relationship with students are limited to the school's profit and benefit objectives.

In fact, in Iranian society, there is a lack of effective sex education that can contribute to the prevention of child sexual abuse, as well as coordinated and systematic policies and supportive services from institutions and organizations to support the victims of abuse. These deficiencies result in an increasing frequency and prevalence of such abuses on a daily basis, and the consequences and repercussions of these abuses are sustainable and intensified. According to the consumers themselves in conducted research, drug abuse is one of the ways they silence their emotions. Since sexual abuse victims seek to suppress negative emotions arising from their experiences and memories of sexual abuse, such as feelings of worthlessness, humiliation, negativity, fear, shame, guilt, powerlessness, hatred, blame, anger, etc., drug abuse becomes one of their preferred methods to temporarily dull these emotions and numb themselves. Therefore, if proper policies are not implemented by families and society in addressing the issues faced by these individuals, addiction will always become

intertwined with the existing harms and other problems we have discussed so far.

Modern families in Iranian society have become a breeding ground for sexual abuse. The culture in Iranian society has created a significant amount of shame and modesty surrounding discussions of sexual issues, making it a taboo topic. This sense of shame is particularly evident when it comes to the sex education of children. It has been observed that parents and even teachers feel ashamed, disturbed, and confused when faced with children's sexual questions. They may even become suspicious of the child or develop feelings of disgust and aversion towards them, leading to the mistreatment of the child.

It is important to note that children naturally begin exploring their bodies from the age of one or two, and understanding of sexual matters, including questions about how babies are born, typically starts around the age of four or five. If appropriate answers are not provided to children's questions, they may repress their curiosity and seek answers from other sources. Therefore, it is necessary to produce educational content centered around sex education for children and adolescents, taking into account the diverse social, cultural, and linguistic aspects of society, as there is a lack of unity in terms of social classes, cultural beliefs, and even geographical regions in Iran.

When discussing sex education for children, we should consider the coordinates of society and its cultural and social characteristics. Iranian society is not homogeneous; there are traditional and conservative segments as well as modern segments influenced by Western lifestyles. Therefore, it is essential to develop unified content that can be utilized by all. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health can play influential roles in this regard. The Ministry of Education can prepare children for social life through necessary education, while the Ministry of Health, with its extensive responsibilities and services provided even in the remotest villages by healthcare workers, can incorporate parental sex education into its agenda. This way, parents can have access to this information and skills before the birth of their children (Kazemi, 2021).

Dysfunctional modern families in Iranian society: a breeding ground for sexual abuse

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Beyond these circumstances, in the traditional lifestyle of Iran, where gathering at the grandmother's house is considered a common practice, children used to spend time confidently alongside their grandmothers. This trust and sense of security could have been risky in a way, and in the modern lifestyle we face today, with women's employment, this delegation takes place differently and for different reasons. Many women, due to the high costs of childcare centres acting as secondary institutions in Iran, entrust their children to their grandmother's or relatives' homes during their working hours. In fact, in the current times, the discussions of women's employment and the exorbitant costs of child care increase the likelihood of children being cared for at their grandmother's or relatives' homes, which are considered safe and secure places. Consequently, the possibility of abuses that can occur through this environment also increases. On the other hand, in underdeveloped societies like Iran, there are no strong support institutions that can effectively protect these children against the vulnerable space of their homes and families, or their function is merely symbolic and limited. As a result, the abused individual is forced to continue living with the abusive parent for years.

In today's Iranian society, the family has become a constant stimulus for sexuality due to unfavourable and turbulent economic and social conditions. In the family, new personalities have emerged, including the nervous woman, the cold-tempered woman, the indifferent or obsessively neglectful mother, the sexually dysfunctional and disturbed husband, the hysterical daughter, the early-matured child, the young homosexual man who refuses marriage or does not pay attention to his spouse, all of whom carry abnormal sexual disorders in the distorted fabric of connection.

The family institution can lack any specific and explicit problems (such as addiction, divorce, neglect, etc.) in its structure, but this does not necessarily mean it is balanced. There are many families that are either rigid and conflict-ridden or lax and detached in their structure. Both types of families are susceptible to providing an appropriate environment for sexual abuse. A strict and conflict-ridden

family refers to a family in which individuals' freedom of action and identity independence are challenged and confronted with obstacles and problems. Single-axis, authoritarian, non-participatory, and non-division-of-labour families are examples of such families that are not uncommon in Iranian society today. Likewise, a lax or detached family refers to families in which freedom is excessively and inappropriately emphasized, and there is a state of detachment that is both irrational and characterized by abandonment. In these families, there are also issues with division of labour and participation, and the sense of emotional attachment and belonging to the family institution is weakened. Both types of families mentioned provide a suitable foundation for the occurrence and perpetuation of sexual abuse and incest because the suppressed or imbalanced emotions and needs of individuals in both types are responded to in a way that is one of the most significant consequences of this imbalance and lack of control by the family institution can be sexual abuse and incest.

Religious families can also provide a basis for encouraging and stimulating sexuality and, consequently, sexual abuse and incest due to the suppression and disregard of individuals' emotions and needs in their teachings, which result from the imposition of limitations. In religious families, individuals learn and internalize emotions such as sin and shame, so they can be more emotionally involved and experience a stronger sense of shame and guilt after experiencing abuse. In this study, the factor of stimulation of abuse is attributed to the lack of body covering, and the sin is realized from outside the individual and manifests as a mechanism of conscience punishment in the individual. These negative emotions arising from the religious and cultural structure of the family, and of course, derived from the religious society, turn the abused individual from a victim into a guilty party, who self-blames for this sin and chooses to remain silent in the face of abuse and its continuation. The individual is constantly challenged by their negative internal emotions, as if the abused person becomes a powerful substitute.

Negative emotions such as fear and guilt, beliefs such as honour, social status, and social approval, as well as the suppression of needs and inappropriate reward and punishment systems in families that are deprived economically and non-economically, are considerable. These factors increase the likelihood of sexual abuse of children and adolescents in these families and the persistence and silence against this abuse. Emotional voids, ineffective caregiving and supervision systems, inappropriate reward and punishment systems in terms of situational analysis by the family as the primary social institution, are important factors in creating a context for sexual abuse of children and adolescents. Furthermore, individuals who live in such families *may* lack self-care skills and are weak in many essential life skills. A significant part of life experience takes shape within the family, and during that process, individuals' emotions and insights are constructed. A family that is unaware of phenomena such as childhood and adolescence will exacerbate these issues and vulnerabilities.

Addiction can transform a family into a centre of conflict and violence through role displacement or elimination, as well as the disruption of the division of labour and emotional balance within the family. The structure and functions of a family affected by addiction are always confronted with issues. Emotional imbalance, such as excessive support or neglect of the psychological and emotional needs of members through imbalanced parenting styles, a centralized power structure, or a form of neglect in family management, as well as the emergence of personalities such as rescuer, victim, controller, passive, etc., contribute to the development of addiction in families.

In fact, single-parent families, also known as single-headed households, which are formed due to divorce or the death of one parent, provide another context and environment for sexual abuse by relatives, as repeatedly mentioned by interviewees. In modern lifestyle and contemporary societies, we frequently encounter these types of families, and in Iranian society, we face them due to global conditions and the proliferation of such family styles. However, the difference lies

in the fact that complementary social institutions and support for these types of families are more efficient and prominent in developed societies due to social welfare levels and social policies. But a society like Iran, which is confronted with developmental issues and challenges arising from economic disparities and the political economic system, lacks the capacity and managerial will. In today's Iranian society, single-parent families lack any support from welfare and support institutions and are also faced with increasing problems and challenges due to the absence of supportive social policies. Among these problems are sexual abuse by relatives or the single parent towards the child, or sexual abuse by close relatives due to the limited control over them caused by the parent's economic concerns.

In Iranian society, the absence of clear laws and the lack of supportive institutions for sexual abuse victims have resulted in not only the lack of protection for these individuals but also their expulsion by the family if the abuse is disclosed. The processes and mechanisms of integrating these individuals into society are not in place; rather, they tend to be more inclined towards expulsion and elimination, which exacerbate the dimensions of the problem.

The issue of family is related to honour and prestige, which leads to the individual being expelled by this institution. Therefore, the abused individual prefers to use mechanisms of silence or engage in other forms of harm, such as child marriage, child spousal relationships, forced marriages, or involvement in other forms of harm, such as prostitution, running away from home, addiction, etc.

Thus, policies based on family expulsion (due to honour and prestige and based on denying the issue) and Iranian society (due to the lack of an effective and supportive legal and civil structure and based on denying the issue) have not only failed to prevent this harm through integration and connection of the abused individual with an effective society but have also led to an increase in other social harms and problems that these individuals employ as defence and avoidance mechanisms against the family and society. Both the Iranian family and society share the utilization of a mechanism of 'denial' in

response to the issue of sexual abuse by relatives in all situations and social layers.

The unaware and uneducated family, like the abused individual, seeks to deny the abuse and utilizes this mechanism. They resort to lying, portraying the abused individual as crazy or mentally unstable, in order to justify and dismiss the issue of sexual abuse by one of their own members. In other words, the power mechanism employed by the family regarding the abused individual manifests through creating alternative narratives and portraying them as insane. Instead of integration and support for the abused individual, dualistic categorizations and punishments occur.

In the dysfunctional families of contemporary Iranian society, a relationship based on trust, honesty, and empathy is absent. The results of interviews indicate that social capital has been weakened both within the structure of the family and within society. Additionally, the mechanism of denial strongly operates within the family and society because the space for dialogue is narrow and poisoned, and its relationships face challenges such as a lack of communication skills and openness to criticism.

Trust and security link individuals to others and foster a sense of belonging and social and emotional connection. In other words, it enables the possibility of integration into social groups, including families and other communities. Conversely, when this trust and sense of security are compromised or weakened, it leads to social exclusion and isolation, and as a result, the individual cannot benefit from emotional support and connection with the group. Assets such as trust and security bring social empathy and have an impact on the individual's social bond with the group and society, as well as social cohesion.

In essence, the extent of the social network derived from an individual's social trust from the early years of their life and influenced by their trust in significant others, namely family members, determines the level of emotional and biological connection with them and shapes their social mindset and lifestyle. Narratives indicate that there is a relationship

between social capital assets such as trust and emotional bonding, and when the emotional bonding and intimacy with important individuals in their life are weakened, they trust and potentially become a victim of sexual assault by others. In this situation, the belief system and fundamental trust are damaged, and subsequently, the individual cannot establish constructive relationships based on trust and empathy with their lived world in subsequent stages of life.

Gender approaches in social education: a differentiating factor in sexual harassment and its consequences

The expression of sexual violence in Iranian society has only recently entered the literature, while before that, not only was it not discussed, but enduring such violence was considered a serious obligation for women, both among intellectuals and the general public. Many sociologists and psychologists believe that violence is an acquired behaviour from childhood. Thinkers like Adrienne Burgess argue that the violence children endure during their early years, especially from their parents' side, will be compensated for in adulthood through a displacement mechanism.

According to Burgess, harsh and aggressive parenting styles can produce dominant and submissive individuals. These firm beliefs about women and children are transmitted as rigid and ingrained beliefs from one generation to another. When combined with emotions, feelings, and beliefs presented as absolute values, they lead to various social damages, including honour killings, child abuse, and more. Perhaps the most important solution to this deadly disease is internal criticism. A serious critique of violence, prejudice, imposed marriages, fixed attitudes, eternal beliefs, from within the spectra and communities that are more affected by these diseases. Only enlightened individuals from within these communities can create a space for questioning and engage in a full-fledged confrontation with such horrific consequences (Bakhtiarnijad, 2009).

The unequal frequency of reporting sexual harassment by both *sexes* and the predominance of women's experiences based on

harassment indicate the differences and discriminatory practices in upbringing and societal acceptance based on biases, approaches, and gender stereotypes. The form and extent of sexual harassment are also influenced by another factor, which is the gender of individuals. The frequency of sexual harassment by relatives towards women is higher than towards men, indicating gender discrimination that has influenced the objective conditions and lifestyles of both sexes differently. The limitations experienced by women due to their sexes, such as limitations in social interactions, have led them to be more subject to sexual harassment by relatives. Meanwhile, men, due to the freedoms they have in social interactions from a masculine perspective, are more likely to experience sexual harassment from strangers and distant individuals. The results of the study indicate that one of the factors that prevents the disclosure of harassment by the harassed, in addition to the issue of honour, is mockery by others, which can be inhibitory only for men and becomes a factor and, of course, an obstacle in discussing gender-related issues and finding meaning (Bakhtiarnijad, 2009).

Narratives of harassed men indicate that prevailing sex approaches and stereotypes in Iranian society, emphasizing the intertwining of power and masculinity or pride and masculinity within the male gender, are deeply ingrained from childhood and institutionalized through social acceptance and socialization processes. This connection and influence demonstrate a reciprocal interaction between the individual and society.

The power of this constructed mindset is such that even when an individual finds themselves in a sexually harassed position, they refrain from disclosing the harassment due to beliefs they hold about their gender and masculinity. They perceive disclosure as a threat to those beliefs and therefore deny or conceal the harassment. Thus, sex and prevailing stereotype beliefs about it become another factor that, alongside other mentioned factors, place blame on the harassed individual and deem them responsible rather than recognizing them as victims of harassment.

As discussed above, if the harassed individual is a woman, she is usually blamed and considered at fault, assuming that she must have engaged in seductive or feminine behaviours that led to the harassment, thereby imposing a sense of shame on her. However, if the harassed individual is a man, he is usually preferred to remain silent and not disclose the harassment because the reactions of others imply that they do not consider the harassment as an affront to male pride and power. The statements above indicate that support networks themselves contribute to creating a sense of shame in the harassed individual, not only failing to support them but also encouraging them to adopt a passive stance based on silence.

The statements demonstrate that the impact of sexual harassment in childhood differs between sexes, with boys feeling a greater sense of guilt due to the socially constructed emphasis on masculinity and pride. Perhaps this sense of guilt is a factor in the development of same-sex attraction in harassed men, while harassed women may experience this feeling as a sense of aversion towards individuals of the opposite sex.

Sexual harassment is not the product of a few wicked men; rather, it is a systematic, managed, and normalized phenomenon. It is no secret that domestic violence and sexual harassment, especially towards girls, are central to other related harms to women and families. This violence occurs through incestuous sexual assault or early and child marriage, but it is less frequently reported for the following reasons:

- 1) Sexual harassment is not reported unless it escalates to *significant* physical violence.
- 2) Due to the taboo nature and association with honour and shame, it is generally not reported.
- 3) A precise and clear definition of sexual harassment is not provided in Iranian legal and criminal laws.
- 4) Cultural beliefs redefine many assaults within the realm of normal and ordinary relationships.

- 5) The dominance of patriarchal culture and lack of economic independence hinder the disclosure of harassment.

Gender stereotypes and the burden of silence: a study on harassed men in Iranian society

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Sexual abuse in children by relatives can be a creator and intensifier of same-sex tendencies in individuals who have been abused, particularly in later stages of their lives, especially during adolescence. In the process of social acceptance, especially during childhood and adolescence when the mind is shaped through social learning and the needs and emotions are constructed, these orientations and tendencies can develop and expand in the individual. Moreover, they can influence the type and style of the individual's relationships and personal and social life in later stages.

Apart from the familial nature of this crime, easy access to the victim, lack of supervision and control by the abuser, the victim's inability to cope with the abuse as a child or adolescent when faced with the abuser, the economic and emotional dependence of the victim on the abuser, and other factors contribute to the exacerbation of the damages caused by this crime.

Sexual abuse by a father, which plays an unparalleled role in the development of an individual regardless of gender, namely in terms of responsibility and security, leads to the child's lack of trust and sense of security in their environment after experiencing abuse by the father. In other words, social assets such as trust and security in the social environment become scarce and ineffective for this individual.

Through observing sexual relationships during childhood, children gain experiences, and since children do not have an understanding and awareness of sexual relationships, when they repeatedly witness the sexual relationships of their parents, the image formed and constructed in their minds, which is mostly involved in experiencing this relationship or, in some cases, disgust towards it, will have detrimental effects and consequences for them. Among these consequences, addiction to sexual relationships and permission to engage in multiple relationships in the form of sexual abuse are included.

In normal children, the determining factors for their personality and social characteristics, which create the basis for their vulnerability to abuse, are derived from parenting styles and social acceptance that they have experienced in their growth process, in their own lifestyle, and in their relationship with the family and the society in which they are placed. In such a way that in a parenting style that is inconsistent and neglectful, the family structure and its functions are unbalanced, and also ineffective in social acceptance.

Therefore, it is possible for children with personality traits such as low self-confidence and self-esteem and negative emotions such as anger and fear to be more susceptible to experiencing abuse from others, especially from close individuals, because due to their lack of self-confidence and lack of skills and courage, they will not have an appropriate response to prevent such abuse.

In narratives, the distinction in a child's characteristics is introduced as a background and factor for sexual abuse by others close to them. This distinction can prevent the integration and conformity of the individual in the family group and other social groups with which the child interacts

and can be a factor in the child's desire to be seen more, which can lead to the detrimental consequences of this visibility, referred to as sexual abuse in the narrative of abuse experiences. However, it should be noted that in the midst of these statements, it becomes clear that at the same time, these distinctions have also become ingrained in the individual to the extent that they regularly express them and they are part of their beliefs. This belief based on distinctions can hinder the individual's integration into groups and their acquisition of skills through living and group experiences, which in turn can be a factor in allowing abuse and not defending oneself against the abuser because the individual is not equipped with the skills that could have been acquired through interaction with groups and peers.

In the statements, reference has been made to children who lack appropriate speech and communication skills. This lack of skills makes them susceptible to being targeted by sexual abusers. Additionally, children belonging to unstable families with structural and functional issues are more exposed to sexual abuse. Both of these characteristics decrease the likelihood of resistance to the abuser's requests, and as a result, the abuser will face lower risks and consequences after the abuse. Afghan children have been more subjected to sexual abuse in this regard because they lack social support in Iranian society, and even in terms of identity issues, they are not supported and deprived of all citizenship rights. This lack of social support and the absence of social policies regarding this social group, which has a significant population in Iranian society, have increased the prevalence of child sexual abuse within this group. In fact, Afghans have no place as citizens in Iranian society to enjoy basic civil and human rights, which creates a conducive environment for the victimization of their children.

Characteristics related to vulnerable children, such as children with disabilities, exist in all societies and are not specific to a particular community. However, the treatment of this group of children varies in different countries based on the level of development and the social and economic situation of each society. In a society like Iran, which is currently grappling with

developmental issues and suffering from an unstable and chaotic economic and social situation, special social groups such as mentally and physically disabled individuals do not receive adequate support, both in terms of living conditions and physical environment, and in terms of social and cultural interactions. Moreover, public awareness about these groups in society is generally low (both socially and mentally). Children in these special social groups, like Afghan children, lack social support and social welfare policies, which makes them more vulnerable to abusers. Therefore, abusers are more likely to choose these children for sexual abuse and exploitation because, due to the lack of social support from the community, they may face fewer future consequences and risks. The tangible reality of society has led these children to have feelings of fear and weakness within themselves because this external lack of support has been institutionalized, leading to lower self-esteem and increased personal fears.

For this reason, they are not equipped with the necessary skills to defend themselves against abusers. In fact, both groups of Afghan children and disabled children (both physically and mentally) are marginalized by society for the aforementioned reasons, and since they lack integration into social groups and social support, they are constantly subjected to abuse. In some cases, these two groups of children are also rejected and repudiated by their own families due to the issues they face, and Iranian families, tired and helpless due to the lack of support from society and social institutions for these children, involuntarily engage in abusing them.

Of course, it should be noted that if ordinary children who are subjected to abuse are analysed and monitored in terms of their personality and psychological characteristics, as well as their skills and emotions, they also have weaknesses in skills such as refusal *confidence* and critical thinking, as well as ineffective personality traits such as low self-esteem, antisocial behaviour, isolation, and negative emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, and shame. These factors can contribute to the occurrence of sexual abuse, alongside the characteristics of the abuser, and perpetuate its continuation. These characteristics, the lack of skills, and negative emotions have their roots in

social life and the foundations of society. One of the most significant effects and consequences of child sexual abuse is the psychological, social, and later mental fixation of the child at the same age and situation in which they were abused, halting their growth within that timeframe.

Speeches indicate that some of the emotions that abused children often experience include feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame, and remorse. Abuse enters the realm of guilt and sinfulness, and ethical methods are applied to it. Abuse turns into wrongdoing and sin, gradually shifting the sense of guilt and sinfulness from the external (society) to the internal and the victimized individual. As a result, the position of the victimized individual, who serves as the victim, changes to that of the wrongdoer. A simultaneous feeling of hatred and resentment towards the abusers, along with feelings of fear and anger, is created in the abused child. Shame is an emotion that acknowledges oneself as a human being. Shame has no relation to self-degradation, humiliation, or insignificance. Feeling ashamed does not mean being aware of one's inferiority and meanness, but rather indicates an awareness of the presence of something inappropriate and contemptible within us that urges us to eliminate it. From this perspective, the effort to deny oneself, to consider oneself unworthy and insignificant, to despise oneself, and to be indifferent to oneself is, in fact, an attempt to eliminate the sense of shame from one's life.

In traditional culture, shame is understood in three concepts: in religious culture, it is understood as sin; in mystical culture, it is understood as modesty; and in ethical culture, it is understood as embarrassment and shamefulness. The common aspect of this type of shame is that it is an external factor that judges our actions and leads us to feel either guilty, modest, or embarrassed and ashamed based on the judgments we accept. However, in modern culture, shame is defined in a way that the individual himself is the primary agent in evaluating his own actions and judging them. Accordingly, Marx's definition of shame is appropriate, which states: 'Shame is a kind of anger towards oneself.' In this definition, it is the individual who analyses his actions, and if he finds deficiencies, weaknesses, or the manifestation of his negative

traits in them, he becomes angry with himself. This anger towards oneself, i.e., shame, motivates the individual to strive to improve himself. Shame is the primary and key element of the human psyche's defence system, which, by questioning the individual's entire personality at each stage of their encounter with such traits, prepares the entire existing evaluation in the person's mind for criticism and elimination of these traits, thereby resolving the limitations and inefficiencies of the individual's actions in society. (Qazi Moradi, 2012)

In statements, the concealment and denial of harm are seen as strategies for self-defence in the face of being harmed. As mentioned above, this fear has its roots in a sense of guilt and wrongdoing that has been internalized by the victim from the external environment of harm, turning them from a victim into a perpetrator. From the above statements, it can be inferred that defending others has a greater priority for the victim than defending oneself. This indicates that the victim has accepted themselves internally and psychologically as a victim and wrongdoer, internalizing this belief, which leads to a lack of effort to defend oneself and instead fighting for others and stopping the harm. In this context, marriage is not in the role of a dramatic bond, but rather it changes the nature and function for the victim and serves as a mechanism to escape rejection with the goal of stopping the harm.

Statements confirm that the sense of guilt and wrongdoing gradually infiltrates from the external (family and society) to the internalized entity and psyche of the victim. The victim's parents, due to the sexual abuse they suffered as a child, always considered them guilty and a wrongdoer, causing them to feel shame and embarrassment. Over time, this belief is also internalized by the victim, that they are responsible for the harm inflicted upon them by others, and this internal sense of guilt and wrongdoing leads to a behavioural response based on the strategy of forced marriage and escaping from home. In fact, not only the family and society (the social context) are not supportive or protective of the sexually abused victim in Iran, but they exacerbate the consequences, dimensions, and ramifications of the harm, and by arranging a permanent relationship and marriage with the abuser, they perpetuate the

experience of harm throughout the victim's life. According to the analyses conducted so far, this social context, through its dysfunctional institutions and public spaces, has been instrumental in creating mechanisms of harm, and after the occurrence of harm, it plays a role once again in the continuity or exacerbation of its destructive consequences in different situations. It is here that Goffman believes: social devaluation leads to self-devaluation. Individuals who are labelled as deviant by others (especially by powerful agents of social control) end up perceiving themselves as deviant. The acceptance of a deviant identity occurs because labelled individuals adopt the opinions of others about themselves and define themselves in the same way others have defined them (Goffman, 2007 [2007]), ultimately resulting in the formation and consolidation of a new identity and leading to emotional, cognitive, and behavioural consequences that are clearly evident in the narratives of the victims.

Individuals who experience stigma may employ various coping strategies to manage the heat of the situation. There are three ways individuals might approach stigma management:

- 1) Denial and concealment: Individuals may deny the stigmatizing attribute and make efforts to hide it, aiming to be accepted as a normal and socially acceptable person.
- 2) Covering and downplaying: Individuals may attempt to downplay the significance of the stigma without denying its existence.
- 3) Isolation and withdrawal: Individuals may choose to isolate themselves and avoid social interactions with non-stigmatized individuals after deliberately disclosing their stigma, seeking to protect themselves from potential rejection.

The choice of each strategy depends on the nature of the stigma to some extent. For the stigmatized individual, the primary task is managing the tension and stress resulting from the visibility of the stigma. On the other hand, for those who perceive the stigmatized individual, the main concern is managing information and keeping the stigma hidden.

The application of all three strategies has been observed in the narratives of victims of sexual abuse. If children receive the necessary education and support from their families and relevant social institutions during their developmental process, they will be better equipped to resist the stigma and the resulting stigma-related stigma.

Freud's perspective analyses the psychological reasons behind defensive actions based on repression as a strategy of self-protection and preservation in the face of harm. However, from a sociological point of view, in Iranian society, which is considered religious and ideological, the dominant gaze of the religious and ideological authorities encompasses all areas and spheres of social structure, including individual beliefs and values. According to this discourse and the norms that legitimize it, covering oneself as a means of protection, care, and avoiding sin has been institutionalized as a document against any form of dominance.

In society, especially in children who are in the stage of socialization and growth, these norms have been internalized in such a way that they are utilized to prevent harm or, in some cases, justify it, with the aim of legitimizing and conforming to these norms. This leads to the construction of the mindset of social actors influenced by the prevailing discourses in society. However, what is evident is that concealing and keeping hidden acts as a form of suppression often leads to arousal and provocation, which historical experiences of societies have proven.

It is clear that when a sexually abused individual does not receive support from their family and society, they may be compelled to engage in behaviours that exacerbate the social issues and damages within that society. One of these behaviours is running away from home, which not only intensifies the issue of girls running away but also leads to the perpetuation of victimization. Therefore, child sexual abuse can be considered a fundamental issue or harm that, if not addressed and mitigated through policies and appropriate measures in societies like Iran, will become a breeding ground for the creation and exacerbation of other social problems and damages, hindering societal development.

The abused individual simultaneously experiences several intense negative emotions, including feelings of humiliation, ridicule, and most importantly, the feeling of powerlessness and helplessness, which will lead to a decrease in self-esteem and self-confidence in their later stages of life. Furthermore, the weakening of social capital, such as security, trust, and empathy, in relation to their social environment, will also have consequences since they have experienced insecurity, distrust, and lack of empathy from significant individuals in their lives, such as their mother, sister, and father. The strategy of pleading and begging can intensify feelings of humiliation, worthlessness, helplessness, and powerlessness in the abused individual.

Essentially, these three intense emotions in the abused individual contribute to the perpetuation of abuse. These emotions consist of feelings of guilt, fear, which includes fear of dishonour that usually entails the consequences of punishment and social deprivation, fear of being labelled, fear of being criticized, and the spread of rumours, and feelings of shame. Each of these emotions has various dimensions. In individuals' subconscious, the consequences of disclosing sexual abuse are recorded, such as punishment, deprivation, labelling, criticism, rumour spreading, etc. All of these consequences indicate that the abused individual is seen more as the culprit and wrongdoer rather than a victim by their family and society. Due to all the mentioned factors, sexual abuse ultimately leads to defensive actions based on denial and secrecy in the abused individual. Therefore, similar to other social phenomena related to the realm of women, there are misconceptions and incorrect beliefs present here as well, which require reconsideration and correction.

Non-official punishments play a significant role in the realm of sexual harassment victims, as their executors are generally ordinary people from a wide spectrum who act against the perpetrator in various situations and at any time, even in the absence of people and when the individual is alone. These types of punishments exert control over the person through their own conscience, as the norms and judgments of others become internalized within the individual and are always a part of their

beliefs. Therefore, the power of non-official punishments goes beyond official punishments.

Statements by interviewees indicate that sexually harassed individuals, aware that they do not hold a societal position as victims (within the family and society), take the initiative to conceal or deny the harassment to avoid punishment and rejection by them. In other words, harassment, as a sin, offense, heinous act, crime, dishonour, etc., leads to punishments and rejection by family and society, and in order to prevent the consequences and repercussions of it, the harassed individual resorts to denial and concealment. The status of the harassed individual changes from being a victim to being the guilty party and a criminal, and the support they receive transforms into blame, punishment, and rejection.

In fact, children who experience sexual abuse, especially by family members, will face internal conflicts and contradictions in their psychological and inner world during adulthood and later stages of life. These conflicts and disruptions in their sense of security and trust in the social environment and the world around them will lead to communication problems and difficulties. The above statements indicate that, in addition to internal contradictions and the disruption of the security and trust system in social communication, the abused individual develops antisocial feelings and chooses behaviours based on isolation and distancing from others. However, these statements also testify that some of these children exhibit behaviours based on rebellion, extreme violence, and incompatibility with the environment and others. Therefore, the more sexual abuse occurs through family members during childhood and becomes more frequent, the more we will witness individuals who are antisocial and unable to have constructive, dynamic, and active interactions with their social world, ultimately weakening social capital, such as honesty, trust, and solidarity, which are essential for the growth and development of society in all dimensions of its existence.

Children who are subjected to sexual assault, particularly by family members, may develop an exaggerated and imbalanced concern for being seen, which is usually manifested in incompatible and violent behaviours of rebellion and

aggression, or they may strive not to be seen, often resulting in becoming introverted and reclusive. In any case, the behavioural balance in these individuals decreases to the extent that they lose the ability to perform balanced and constructive actions in their environment.

The problems arising from childhood sexual abuse also disrupt marital relationships. The feeling of violation and assault during sexual acts with a life partner stems from the lived experiences of victims. Additionally, these individuals lack the skill of saying no in their social interactions. Another issue is the survival of normative fear. The same mechanism that leads to the perpetration of sexual abuse in childhood continues to sustain the abuse in later stages, affecting the personal and social life of the individual in different ways. Due to the preservation of social dignity and honour, they are forced to spend the rest of their lives alongside someone they do not have emotional connection with, subjecting themselves to further forms of violation and assault through marriage, which is considered a socially legitimate contract.

Another consequence of child sexual abuse by relatives is forced marriage, often manifesting as child marriage, and divorce, usually occurring after forced marriages. The inappropriate approach of the family and society towards these types of abuses not only fails to prevent them but also leads to the emergence of other damages and issues. Families and communities become involved and incur various costs, leading to a defective and futile cycle. As a result, due to the fear of dishonour and rejection, in many cases, the possibility of marriage becomes impossible or limited.

Furthermore, it seems that the abused individual experiences a strong sense of helplessness and powerlessness, possibly influenced by feelings of worthlessness and indignity. Pessimism towards the gender that has subjected the individual to abuse is always present, to such an extreme extent that all individuals of the same gender as the perpetrator are perceived as aggressors and abusers. As a result, the social relationships and interactions of the abused individual are disrupted and inadequate. Clearly, childhood sexual abuse affects the individual's interpretation of sexual pleasure and

the frequency of sexual relationships, and if the abuse is perpetrated by individuals of the same gender, it may influence the individual's sexual orientation and become determinative in later stages of life.

Childhood sexual abuse can also be a factor in early sexual maturation, ultimately leading to multiple sexual relationships and addiction to sexual relationships. Addiction to sexual relationships has numerous psychological and social detrimental effects on the individual, affecting their social relationships, career, lifestyle, and overall social existence with irreparable and destructive consequences. This issue, like any other addiction, is progressive and relapsing, and may continue to impact and entangle the individual's life in various ways until the end of their life. The perception of the abused individual towards themselves is negative, considering themselves as sinful and impure, undeserving of goodness. Feelings of low self-esteem, worthlessness, and indignity towards others may also stem from this same place.

Premature maturity in individuals who have been abused is accompanied by a lack of skill in saying no and a sense of dependency, or these can be seen as consequences and effects of the abuse. The sense of dependency can disrupt a person's emotional foundation and create clingy relationships with others, resulting in imbalanced social interactions and depriving them of opportunities for healthy, love-based relationships. Premature maturity can lead a person to engage with peer groups that are not their age-mates, exposing them to experiences that do not align with their actual age and consequently subjecting them to harm and other issues. The consequences of joining these groups for an abused individual who has also experienced premature maturity can include a tendency towards addiction and drug abuse, sexual addictions and promiscuity, homosexuality, and other vulnerabilities and problems.

A child who is subjected to abuse by their mother and stepfather, living in a society where they receive no support from social institutions and where no social policies have been developed to change their lifestyle, is ultimately driven towards illegal activities and may end up in correctional and

rehabilitation institutions as a children's prison. Additionally, there are neighbourhoods within this Iranian society that encourage children, especially boys, to engage in fights, self-display, and bullying as a form of entertainment. Unaware that the false sense of pride, accompanied by feelings of inferiority and internal conflicts resulting from harmful experiences, paves the way for other social issues and vulnerabilities, it sometimes affects the entirety of the individual's social life during their lifetime.

A sense of differentiation and inclination towards self-gratification is also evident in sexually abused children. The sense of differentiation can hinder the establishment of constructive social relationships, and self-gratification can open the door to sexually risky behaviours for the abused individual. The least consequence of such behaviour is a sense of guilt, accompanied by self-condemnation and ultimately resorting to supernatural forces for forgiveness and absolution of sins. Having an objectifying and commodifying view of oneself in sexually abused individuals sometimes leads to body manipulation in order to seek the approval of others, which in turn reinforces their self-control mechanism. The tendency of sexually abused individuals to become actors or performers indicates that these children seek to be seen; this mental preoccupation is likely to arise from feelings of humiliation, worthlessness, and inner powerlessness resulting from their experience of sexual abuse in childhood.

Sexual abuse during childhood is associated with body manipulation, which causes harm to various parts of the body, including sexual organs and other areas. Just when a child is in the stage of recognizing their body, they are exposed to such manipulation, and this manipulation leaves not only physical and biological signs on their body, but also a burning stigma on their mind and soul, which is constantly present throughout their life. The body and mind are inseparable in the context of child sexual abuse. While abuse leaves physical signs on the body, it also leaves a burning mark on the spirit and psyche, each reminding the other and ultimately manifesting as suffering. The abused body and soul serve as a kind of semiotics of the language and speech of abuse.

Losing one's virginity concurrently creates a sense of fear and worthlessness in an individual. This fear and worthlessness are the results of constructed beliefs within society, family, and culture. These beliefs suggest that having virginity is the essence and value of an unmarried woman's existence, and losing it is an unfortunate event that invites ridicule from the same family and community. It is openly and covertly controlled, and its absence equates to shame and worthlessness.

Not only does sexual abuse indicate the suffering of the victimized individual and disrupt their life, but in some cases, it can also lead to death and annihilation. This death is the most apparent sign of sexual abuse, and its hidden functions have serious, profound, and multidimensional impacts on the victim's entire life and all aspects of their existence. Since sexual abuse is perpetrated by close relatives and significant others during stages when the individual is deeply connected to their family life and social environment (childhood and adolescence), its effects are undeniably recorded in their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, engulfing all dimensions of their being and momentarily leaving them in a state of despair, essentially marking their existence and life. This can lead to a pattern of body manipulation in the individual, rooted in psychological and mental influences derived from the experience of sexual abuse.

A child or adolescent who has been exposed to and sexually abused interprets their social world based on dominant feelings of guilt, blame, and condemnation. They constantly engage in the process of assigning meaning to these feelings and consistently, as a result of this sense of guilt, grapple with a troubled conscience. In subsequent years of life, this guilt can deprive them of logical reasoning in various life situations and continually lead to self-sacrifice in their interactions, perpetually assuming the roles of victim or saviour, reproducing it socially. This pattern assigns the roles of victim and saviour to the individual, always excessively supporting others' needs and priorities over their own, without any logical reasoning behind this preference. This process stems from dependency and attachment-based relationships the

individual forms with others. Of course, these relationships also involve their negative emotions, including fear and shame, which have emerged as a result of sexual abuse. In most situations, due to the fear of losing others and the experienced shame, the individual lacks the skill to say no to the requests and needs of others, and on the other hand, they appear in the role of victim and saviour due to their adhesive relationships. These mechanisms appear one after another in a cycle of individual actions, perpetuating and reproducing each other.

In fact, the role of the victim will lead to a self-perceived saviour behaviour. An individual who feels victimized, as they cannot analyse their own role and contribution in everyday life issues and social relationships based on logic and rational approach, engages in saviour-based and excessive support actions in their interactions with others in situations that may sometimes result in a sense of failure in relationships. Additionally, the role of the victim also involves a tendency to avoid responsibility and attribute their own role and contribution in daily life matters to others. In both victim and avoidance cases, the individual does not accept responsibility and their role in a rational and balanced manner. In fact, the victimized individual is often caught in a triangle, and each of the experienced situations represents one point of this triangle: the feeling of anger, the role of the victim, and the saviour-based or avoidance behaviour, ultimately resulting in the experience of failures in life.

Based on the paradigms that form in the mind and the emotions that are constructed in the affected individual as a result of experiencing sexual abuse in childhood and adolescence, they begin to assign meanings and interpret social life situations. These interpretations and meanings create actions as the individual's functioning.

Today, issues such as lack of focus and learning disorders in children are often considered as strong evidence of hyperactivity in children, or animal abuse, obsession, and self-harm. These issues have been observed in individuals addicted to drugs and sex in their childhood. Reviewing these cases indicates that issues such as hyperactivity and addiction may be related to the experience of sexual abuse in childhood.

Depression, as an illness, is also associated with various social problems and damages, including sexual abuse, addiction, self-harm, and so on.

Disconnecting from reality, which manifests itself as a lack of focus, is evident in many damages and phenomena, including sexually abused individuals, drug addicts, and sex addicts. In other words, due to unpleasant memories that these individuals have experienced, they disconnect from reality, which is recorded as an ugly and bad image in their minds. This disconnection is manifested as a lack of focus, which has many destructive effects in various aspects of life, especially in the process of social learning. According to the above statements, obsession and various addictive and repetitive behaviours are among the important consequences of sexual abuse aimed at reducing the stress and anxiety caused by abuse. The sexually abused individual harbours hidden anger towards their caregivers who were responsible for their care in childhood but failed to fulfil their duties. They feel that this anger will have a lasting impact on their emotional relationship with them in all subsequent stages of life.

In fact, mood disorders that affect the stability of their conditions, especially the balance in their emotions and feelings, can arise from the internal conflicts, contradictions, and tensions that we mentioned earlier. As sexually abused individuals are less behaviourally and emotionally stable compared to others, they will exhibit unpredictable and non-transparent behaviours in social relationships. This factor itself leads to distrust in them by others and consequently, they experience failures in social relationships. On one hand, their trust and empathy are affected by sexual abuse, while on the other hand, trust from others in their external and social relationships is also diminished. In other words, psychological and social factors have a dialectical interaction.

Self-harm and drug abuse are among the consequences of sexual abuse. If we pay attention to the delusions caused by drug abuse and the fantasies and mental states associated with self-harm, or in other words, self-harming behaviours, we will find signs of protest and harm in all of them. Drug abuse and self-harm can be understood as forms of protest or resistance

that require careful examination and analysis. By looking at these behaviours through the lens of psychology and sociology, we can gain a deeper understanding of their underlying causes and motivations. Additionally, by recognizing the signs and symptoms of these behaviours, we can provide support and resources to those who may be struggling with addiction or mental health issues.

However, according to Freudian analysis, a self-harming case can also be harmful to others in different situations, and this applies to sexual abuse victims as well. A sexually abused individual, as a victim, experiences harm and exploitation in relation to the abuser. However, in another situation, this same individual, as a mechanism of compensation and influenced by emotions and experiences affected by abuse, such as anger, disgust, jealousy, etc., inflicts harm on others in their social relationships and acts as a sadistic aggressor.

Cruelty toward animals in childhood can have its causes in childhood sexual abuse, and such experiences are observed in individuals studying other damages like addiction, etc., during childhood. This component can indicate the connection between issues and damages. The narratives indicate that the sexually abused individual has a sense of humiliation and self-depreciation regarding their sexuality, and to compensate for this, they distance themselves from their own gender and try to present themselves as a powerful gender, usually adopting the male gender. This substitution likely stems from the experience of abuse. This indicates that sexual abuse affects one's approach to their sexuality, although this influence is intensified by gender stereotypes rooted in social mentality, such as viewing women as secondary and weak, etc. Three factors contribute to the tendency of sexually abused individuals towards the opposite gender: 1) a sense of humiliation and self-depreciation regarding their own gender due to sexual abuse experience, 2) the desire to be seen, and 3) gender stereotypes dominant in social mentality.

The examined narratives indicate the existence of anger resulting from the experience of abuse in the sexually abused individual, which leads to aggressive behaviours. Additionally, the feeling of hatred combined with the desire to be seen

creates conflicting emotions that, depending on the situation, result in contradictory and imbalanced actions. Based on Martin's words, their actions either lean towards isolation, avoidance, and rejection, or towards anger and aggression.

The issues of acceptance and socialization of these children within families arise from the ignorance and lack of understanding of their childhood and adolescent phenomena. However, from a sociological perspective, emotions, which are a new area of study in sociology, are a missing link that requires attention and observation. Usually, conditions that lead individuals to take action and their actions themselves are tangible and perceptible, which is why they are examined. However, since conditions generally give rise to emotions in individuals, groups, or societies, and emotions lead to actions, emotions become an intermediate and missing link because they are often not the focus of study due to their subjective and intangible nature.

Usually, the emotional reactions that sexually harassed individuals experience manifest situationally, and in each situation, they analyse and express their emotions according to the relevance and proportionality of that situation. In some cases, they can express their emotions in a combined, integrated, and sometimes contradictory manner with the situation itself. Emotions such as fear, stress, anger, shame, guilt, pessimism, contempt, rejection, victimization, denial, etc., which are prominent in sexually harassed individuals and form the infrastructure of their other emotions, can be referred to as central, core, or nucleus emotions.

The emotions experienced by the harassed individual are not analysable in isolation. Instead, these emotions are interconnected and intensified in a cycle. For example, the feeling of guilt and blame debases the individual's self-approach, leading to feelings of contempt and worthlessness. Since the sense of worthlessness destroys self-esteem, it triggers feelings of shame in the individual, followed by denial and sorrow. The foundation of all these emotions is internal and fundamental fear and anger. These emotions are the result of the experiences the individual has gone through, namely the experience of harassment, and the consequences of all these

emotions are the actions that the individual exhibits in social relationships, situations, and biological and social events. This process is evident in all research on the subject.

In Iranian society, under the influence of stereotypes that dominate the cultural space, the male gender is usually seen as a symbol of power and masculinity. Therefore, sexual harassment against women is more accepted, and these dominant beliefs in the social mindset have also shaped men's minds as actors and symbols of power. Men themselves are socialized from childhood in a way that instils power and pride in them, further emphasizing the power of society in shaping minds. Consequently, if the opposite is true, that is, if it is the man who experiences sexual harassment, it brings about a greater sense of worthlessness for him. It is noteworthy that this social mindset works inversely in gender approaches in issues such as addiction. Generally, male addiction is more accepted in public consciousness because addiction is considered a male problem, and its sexual aspect is concealed due to low social awareness. On the other hand, women are labelled as uglier and more associated with self-selling. For this reason, addicted women face different challenges than men. For example, they may engage in activities such as leaving home and prostitution solely for the purpose of buying and using drugs because they are more under the control of family and society and cannot and should not consume within their homes.

According to the labelling approach derived from sociological perspectives, when an individual is labelled by someone or others, gradually the social relationships shape their mind as well. This power of society is evident in constructing the individual's subjective beliefs and self-perception. Thus, when a harassed individual is labelled, they internalize that label and gradually accept it, moving towards believing and acting in line with it. Additionally, the confrontation with the opposite gender in a sexually harassed individual who has experienced sexual assault can create inclinations and tendencies based on same-sex attraction. In fact, the feeling of differentiation, distinctiveness, and a unique sense mentioned in the discourse not only destabilizes the social connection of the harassed

individual with others in social relationships but also undermines their connection with personal and social reality and distorts their image.

We rely on Erik Fromm's perspective to explain the emergence of these infertile characters. He considers the health of societies to be their harmony with human nature and their fundamental needs. He identifies a society as unhealthy when it obligates individuals to perform actions solely aimed at fulfilling the goals and intentions of the social and communal organization. When a social character (such as male dominance) dominates human behaviour and reason lacks the ability to establish relationships based on love, empathy, respect, freedom, and individual independence, it is a time when the individual becomes separated from their divine part and their animalistic part becomes active. They will no longer engage in behaviours associated with love and security. They no longer love themselves or others in the true sense of the word. This is where their relationships are based on social character, and the individual becomes empty of their humanity.

According to Fromm, the prerequisite for the survival of any living being, especially humans, is to have a 'sense of security.' In the absence of this, the individual will either die or suffer from mental illness or even contemplate suicide. Fromm believes that to regain this lost security, humans typically resort to two contrasting orientations: fertile (healthy) and infertile (unhealthy). Each point to different human characters. The first type of infertile character is characterized by the orientation toward 'closeness.' The individual seeks to escape the danger of loneliness by becoming part of others, either through being absorbed in them or by assimilating others into themselves. The former is clinically referred to as 'sadism,' which inclines toward self-abandonment and dependence on others. This type of dependency is often justified through victimizing oneself, fulfilling obligations, or claiming it as love, especially when cultural patterns also embrace such justifications. The other form of dependency is the assimilation of others into oneself to the extent that the individual exerts control over others, thereby escaping their

own anxiety towards freedom. Fromm refers to this type of dependency as 'masochism,' which is accompanied by emotions such as love, intense support, and justified revenge. Both of these relationships indicate a certain type of closeness between individuals.

Another type of infertile relationship is formed based on 'alienation' from others. This can take two forms: active or passive. The active type perceives the existence of others as a threat and seeks to eliminate this threat in any way possible. In such circumstances, the physical or mental presence of others for the alienated individual is considered a severe danger and a serious threat. To regain their lost security, this individual must eliminate the source of this threat, turning them into a destructive and aggressive person.

Another type is passive withdrawal, which leads to indifference and conformity with the crowd. In this type of relationship, the individual treats themselves as a commodity in the everyday exchange and becomes what others desire. The most prevalent form of this attachment is market attachment. All these attachments, in their various forms of infertility, result in the alienation of humans from their essential nature and the dehumanization of the individual or their acceptance as a passive entity in the face of environmental conditions. The outcome is nothing but the reduction of humans to a one-dimensional, unhealthy, and artificial being.

Self-reflection and discovering one's natural abilities, such as reason, imagination, and the belief that security can be achieved by relying on these abilities and adopting fertile attachments based on love and mutual respect with others, are essential conditions for the formation of fertile attachments and a proper response to achieving security. However, all of this requires a healthy structure that, unfortunately, current systems not only fail to guarantee the well-being of society and the individual but also transform humans into mere instruments devoid of power, rebellion, and human qualities. They constantly belittle their independence, reason, and imagination and turn them into solitary entities. (Adapted by Tanhaee, 385-388 from 'The Art of Loving' by Erich Fromm)

Sexual harassment as a form of abusive relation with one's social environment

The phenomenon of sexual harassment represents a dysfunctional mode of social interaction arising from an inability to establish constructive connections within one's social environment. Perpetrators who develop antisocial personalities often resort to harassment as a maladaptive means of engaging with the social world when their needs as social beings cannot be met through balanced interpersonal dynamics.

In cases where perpetrators have endured sexual abuse in childhood, the act of harassment can function as a compensatory reaction, perpetuating a defective cycle in which the victim becomes the victimizer in subsequent situations. However, the dominance and bullying displayed by perpetrators should be analysed as situational characteristics. As Erich Fromm posited, every perpetrator has been a victim in another context, and vice versa, creating a cyclical pattern influenced by the specific social milieu in which an individual is situated. Authoritarian or domineering social contexts can elicit submissive behaviours, while the same individual may exhibit dominance when placed in a different social setting involving power dynamics.

It is noteworthy that perpetrators often experience conflicting emotions, such as fear, anger, a sense of control, shame, and guilt. They are frequently characterized by emotional voids, attention-seeking complexes, and a proclivity towards antisocial behaviour and isolation. Additionally, low self-control is a psychological trait commonly associated with perpetrators.

From a sociological perspective, sexual harassment can be interpreted as an action constructed through the dialectic of objective reality and subjective mental interpretation. The perpetrator's mental construct emerges from the objective conditions and social characteristics, such as class, gender, and life experiences, that shape their characteristics. By analyzing these conditions, one can gain insight into the underlying factors contributing to the perpetrator's actions.

Sexual harassment can be categorized as a goal-directed and emotionally driven action, as it occurs under the influence of the perpetrator's emotions and pursues a specific objective. Although it may appear habitual, this does not preclude the examination of its multidimensional nature. For instance, the perpetrator's childhood experiences of sexual abuse or witnessing sexual violence (social objectivity) can construct a mindset that, when confronted with similar objective situations in adulthood (social objectivity), manifests in harassment as an action (the confrontation between social objectivity and social mindset).

The aggression exhibited by perpetrators can be viewed as an action arising from internal emotions. According to the sociological perspective on emotions, the root of this aggression lies in the individual's conditions and background. When individuals find themselves in unstable conditions, they may experience dissatisfactions that lead to the emergence of negative and destructive emotions, prompting them to resort to anger and aggression as actions. The narrative illustrates how the perpetrator's lack of personal independence and intense control by his mother may have contributed to the anger and aggressive actions he displayed, one manifestation of which occurred in the form of sexual harassment.

It is evident that perpetrators can exhibit both submissive and fearful behaviours towards certain individuals, while simultaneously exhibiting dominant and aggressive behaviours towards their victims. Importantly, perpetrators often experience a range of conflicting emotions, including fear, anger, a sense of control, shame, and guilt.

Charles Horton Cooley proposes a three-stage process, known as 'the looking-glass self,' to explain how the concept of 'self' is formed in the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society during the experience of socialization:

- 1) The emergence of the 'self' as perceived by others or in the reflection of the 'selves of others.'
- 2) How others judge and evaluate the manifestation of our 'self.'

- 3) The emotional response within ourselves as a result of the judgments and evaluations of others, which can lead to either pride or a feeling of inadequacy (as a bitter interpretation of solitude).

These three stages represent the emergence, adjustment, and completion of the self in relation to others. If this process of formation is disrupted in any way, the self may manifest in an unhealthy manner. Cooley argues that the roots of this perception lie primarily in the economic structure of individuals rather than in biological factors. He believes that poverty and its consequences originate from society rather than nature. Poverty leads to certain social classes developing unique cultures and normative patterns due to their disadvantaged living conditions and limited opportunities. Life opportunities, such as equal access to employment, housing, and education, are to some extent determined by the presence or absence of these factors, and social classes are differentiated based on these disparities. Consequently, individuals' understanding of their social class status significantly influences their lifestyle and behaviour.

Systemic Silencing

The process of denial in the realm of sexual harassment is a common mechanism that involves individuals, families, and societies, as well as the underlying factors that contribute to it.

In closed and ideological systems like Iran, there is a coordinated collaboration between the abused child, who is the victim, and their family, who bear the responsibility of protecting and defending the child against abuse and abusers. Additionally, there are supervisory and legal institutions with the shared objective of concealing or denying the abuse in order to preserve honour, as child sexual abuse is considered a disgraceful matter that must be kept hidden.

As a result of the influence of this perspective and belief, abused children adopt the defensive action of hiding and denying the abuse. This collaborative denial takes shape between the abusers, who wield power, and the abused children, who are subjected to that power. Ultimately, the

abused individuals may even resort to marriage as a means of legitimizing the abuse, which has always been deemed repugnant.

Based on the information gleaned from interviews, the abusers' successful use of threatening mechanisms lies in the societal perception and the victims' mindset, which place greater emphasis on the notion of being a victim of something ugly and disgraceful, rather than focusing on the actual acts of harassment, assault, and violation. Consequently, the fear of exposure is regarded as a threat to honour, leading to its concealment like a secret. This perpetuates the cycle of abuse, with the abusers' threats receiving a positive response.

One of the consequences of child abuse is the erosion of the child's social capital, including trust, security, and honesty within their living environment and social life. This erosion is to such an extent that the child refrains from taking any action to disclose the abuse and harassment to society. Neglecting these issues gradually weakens the social capital of the community as a whole.

One of the consequences of child abuse is the weakening of social capital, such as trust, security, and honesty, concerning the child's environment and social life. As a result, the child refrains from taking any action to inform society about the abuse and harassment. Neglecting these issues gradually weakens the social capital of the community as a whole.

The study reveals a significant deficit in victims' knowledge about accessible support systems for reporting incidents of sexual abuse within Iranian society. This deficiency underscores the failure of relevant institutions to adequately disseminate information and promote awareness on this critical issue. The findings accentuate the urgent need to rectify problematic practices in media and communication channels to ensure victims receive proper guidance and resources when faced with such traumatic experiences.

An individual's mindset and perspectives are fundamentally shaped by their lived experiences within familial and societal contexts, which are influenced by tangible conditions encompassing economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

These concrete realities mold the cognitive and psychological realms of social actors, informing the nature and direction of their actions.

Through examining the discourse of interviews, it becomes apparent that the intersection of tangible circumstances and mental constructs creates a fertile ground for the social reality of sexual harassment to take root. This reality is reciprocally reconstructed and reinforced through the realm of daily actions and thought processes, acquiring entrenched and normalized layers over time. It takes on an aura of inevitability, as if it has always been an inherent and natural phenomenon, obscuring its recognition as a social issue warranting comprehensive sociological understanding and analysis. Consequently, the underlying social and economic factors that enable concealed and neglected instances of sexual abuse remain unaddressed.

The following provides an exposition of the functioning of emotional mechanisms from the perspective of reciprocal interactionism and the sociology of emotions, as proposed by Hochschild.⁴ According to Hochschild, emotions are

⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild was born in 1940 in Maryland, United States. Her worldview led her to see the world as divided into male and female spheres, the male world being the world of professional and specialized work, the female world being the world of care and nurturing. Her studies in this field led her to argue that sociology belongs to the male work sphere, its theories and methods have been shaped and developed based on the male experience. Therefore, she sought to introduce a sociology that would also be influenced by the female experience. This sociology does not merely study social reality based only on numbers, statistics and overt realities, but analyzes and examines people's everyday life stories in their own words. In this approach, she wants to answer this important question: It is not only important to know how individuals in society think, but it is also important to know how they feel. The sociology of emotion pursues this goal.

These are publications on this theme at least mostly in the present century:

- <https://www.routledge.com/Human-Emotions-A-Sociological-Theory/Turner/p/book/9780415427821>
- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228173844_Sociological_Theories_of_Human_Emotions

fundamentally intertwined with bio-cognitive impulses. In contrast to our other sensory faculties, emotions directly intersect with an individual's behaviour. They arise when the individual's body is biologically prepared to engage in a social action, giving rise to emotions during the course of the action.

When preparing to act, emotions incorporate cognitive elements in the form of 'symbolic functioning.' Therefore, emotions are the result of our efforts to adapt to past experiences and current realities. Importantly, emotions are not fixed bio-cognitive or psychological data that are impervious to the influence of society and culture. Instead, they are actively generated and managed within the realm of reciprocal interaction by conscious individuals. They are not simply derived from experiences but rather created. In a significant sense, we engage in emotional labour, actively shaping and regulating the nature and intensity of the emotions we express during our endeavours.

Emotional labour may involve simultaneous efforts to cultivate motivation for shaping specific emotions or exert control over other emotional responses. Hochschild emphasizes the managerial aspect of emotional labour as an 'inner action,' a mental exertion aimed at producing emotions rather than merely experiencing them. It entails an authentic feeling that is self-induced and deliberate (Hochschild, 1979). This particular point was observed in the context of the study on victims of sexual abuse, where the process of denial was witnessed.

The multidimensional relationship between the need for recognition, dependency, and deprivation as sustaining factors for sexual abuse

The use of deception techniques by perpetrators demonstrates the existence of suppressed needs, such as emotional needs and the need for attention in a child, which are typically unmet or overlooked by significant others, including responsible caregivers and family members. Children who experience

suppressed needs or insufficient attention are more susceptible to responding positively to the manipulations of abusers.

Ownership-based relationships of an adhesive nature between mother and son are characterized by excessive and pathological dependency. The possessive sentiment, which undermines the mother's role as a nurturing parent teaching the art of love to her child, erodes the foundation. Every individual establishes a connection with the social world around them based on the concept of love, first experienced and modelled in relationships with the mother. A child who experiences such possessive and adhesive relationships instead of the concept of love in relation to the mother develops an imbalanced and dependent connection with their social environment, leading to future experiences of masochistic and sadistic relationships.

In abused children, emotional voids and lack of attention are evident, and the emotional richness of these voids is exploited by the abuser, who provides a response based on affiliation, thereby facilitating the continuation of abuse. Interview data reveals that abusers took advantage of their physical and bodily strength over children who were physically weaker, capitalizing on the negligence, lack of care, and defencelessness of the child by their guardians, authorities, and caregivers. The mere physical and bodily strength of the abusers was not the sole reason for the realization of the abusive goal or a sufficient justification. Instead, these voids served as conditional grounds for vulnerability and abuse.

In narratives, the lack of awareness alongside the economic deprivation of a child's father who is subjected to abuse has been mentioned. This confirms the hypothesis that deprivation has extensive dimensions, with material, economic, and financial deprivation being one of its dimensions, and indeed the most important one, as economic or material deprivation sets the stage for other dimensions of deprivation and serves as a prerequisite for all other dimensions. Deprivation in all its dimensions forms the basis for the sexual abuse of children.

The provided examples demonstrate the relationship between the basic needs of Afghan immigrants and the sexual abuse of their children. These immigrants, who are deprived of basic needs and minimum human rights in Iranian society, and the conditions they experience in Iranian society, create a context where their children are more exposed to sexual abuse. Abusers also take advantage of techniques to addict children because it creates a strong dependency based on the need for consumption and enables them to create a conducive environment for abuse and its continuation by meeting the addictive needs of the addicted child.

In general, the dependent relationship of the abused individual or their surrounding family members with the abuser usually hinders the disclosure of abuse and confronting the abuser. This dependency includes both material dimensions such as livelihood and place of residence, as well as non-material, psychological, and emotional dimensions. On the other hand, the lack of intimate relationships among family members that undermines the abused person's trust and security towards them is a factor that prevents them from talking about and disclosing the abuse. In a society like Iran, where supportive institutions and organizations do not effectively operate due to developmental challenges, they have not been able to provide a suitable substitute for this lack of support from the family or dependency crises.

Shame due to the lack of intimate relationships with the mother and the wrongful perception of abusive actions due to habitual judgments are other factors that have led to the denial of abuse by the abused person and the lack of disclosure. However, the minds of children and adolescents are influenced by society and its beliefs, and since society does not have a supportive approach towards abuse victims and tends to see the abused as more responsible and guilty rather than victims of social processes, these assumptions and beliefs also confuse the minds of the abused and internalizing this wrong mindset perpetuates the flawed cycle of abuse.

The challenges of official and unofficial support networks for victims of sexual abuse in Iranian society

Official and unofficial support networks in Iranian society face obstacles and challenges that hinder the protection of children and addressing the issue of abuse. Unofficial support networks, such as family, friends, and acquaintances, may face cultural stereotypes that perceive addressing sexual abuse as shameful, due to social unawareness about how to confront the issue. Additionally, the lack of conducive spaces for dialogue and interaction, influenced by generational differences and conflicts in the current values system in Iranian society, renders these networks ineffective and inefficient, disrupting trust and honesty necessary for disclosure. On the other hand, official support networks are also ineffective due to unfavourable economic and social conditions, low levels of social welfare, and the absence of supportive policies and services, especially for vulnerable social groups such as children, the elderly, and women. Consequently, both official and unofficial support networks have proven ineffective as strategies for preventing abuse against children.

Furthermore, children, who should actively and intelligently employ strategies to avoid abuse, often lack the necessary education, awareness, and skills. This reflects the need for a comprehensive understanding of societal institutions, including family, schools, and mass media, in terms of their structure and functioning. The lack of maternal support for a child who experiences sexual abuse by the father is rooted in the issues of gender inequality, discrimination, and the economic dependence of women in Iranian society. Women often lack the necessary independence, skills, and support to defend their children against sexual abuse by men.

When a child is restricted or suppressed by others who are responsible for guiding them at the beginning of their path of meaning-making, or if they are not properly directed, they are labelled as deviant or abnormal by the very same society that has contributed to their inappropriate labelling process. Society never questions the process of expulsion and always

focuses its scrutiny on those who have been marginalized, perpetuating the mechanism of power dominance over reality.

Ethics as the dominant discourse surrounding sexual harassment in Iranian society and its consequences

Ethics usually varies based on time, place, social system, class structure, etc. Therefore, it is inherently relative, but ethical rules that discuss the importance of moral behaviour (rights and obligations, good and evil, virtue and vice) and the criteria for evaluating it have less relative aspects. These rules establish general ethical principles and clarify their nature. However, ethical standards derived from specific stages of human relations and their realization in society will gradually give way to normal and general human solidarity and cooperation, losing their distinct quality. Eventually, even ethical principles themselves will become outdated (Tabari, 1358; 68-69). The issue of sexual harassment as an action, phenomenon, or unethical reality is not perceived by families and society until its various dimensions and aspects are examined and monitored. The dominance of ethical and customary discourse has so restricted the space for non-conventional sexual relationships that logical analysis and argumentation regarding the phenomenon of sexual harassment and its dimensions are not easily achievable.

In any political-class structure, ethical standards are mentally imposed and prescribed without being linked to the tangible needs of individuals, based on the survival and justification of that structure. This dominant ethical discourse legitimizes the victim as the perpetrator and wrongdoer, labelling them as dishonourable, and eventually justifies their expulsion, condemnation, and punishment. Part of the suppression of the victim originates from family beliefs, while another part is hidden within the family's self-interest actions. Family beliefs that discourage victims from disclosing abuse include notions of honour, judgment, condemnation, and more. Family's self-interest actions include denial, non-acceptance, punishment, expulsion, threats, humiliation, ridicule, conflict, and tension.

Here, we can understand the role of 'power' in perpetuating oppression. Weber defines power as the ability of a holder to

make others submit to their will in any possible way (Beshiriye, 2002: 74), and Parsanz defines power as the ability of an individual or a group to control or influence others, regardless of their desires and will (Azdanlu, 2005: 272). In Foucault's analysis, power is an action that leads to change or direction in the behaviour of others. From this perspective, power is a general structure of practices that affects the possibilities of other actions. Power incites, seduces, facilitates, or complicates, imposes limitations, or outright prohibits. However, power always operates on the mode of action, as the agent acts or is capable of acting (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 2008: 358).

In examining the statements, it becomes evident that perpetrators of harassment often prevent disclosure of the abuse by resorting to bullying, force, power, violence, and threats. This factor, coupled with portraying the victim as the culprit and wrongdoer, contributes to the concealment and continuation of the abuse. As mentioned in previous analyses, because the victim is not perceived as a true victim and this belief is internalized by the victim, it provides a suitable platform for the abuser to exploit their physical power and bullying tactics.

The role of schools in preventing and addressing sexual harassment of children and adolescents

School, as the second institution in socializing and integrating children after the family, has the greatest responsibility in social upbringing and societal support for children. However, unfortunately, it suffers from weaknesses and deficiencies that not only limit its educational function but also raise doubts about its educational roles. Having a structured system where counsellors hold a special and specialized position, and their selection is carried out according to coherent principles and rules, all contribute to the educational function of the school. Research findings suggest that school-going children face such restrictions and control that their sense of security and trust is disrupted within this dominant environment. The fear of being stigmatized, criticized, punished, or expelled by the school institution creates a significant barrier, discouraging victims

from reporting or disclosing incidents of sexual harassment. As a result, they opt to deny any form of assault, leaving the depth and severity of their traumatic experiences unaddressed and unresolved. This situation highlights the critical need to examine and address the dysfunctional elements within the school system in Iranian society, particularly concerning its crucial role in educating and safeguarding children and adolescents.

The school, in line with the family institution and the broader Iranian society, assumes the presumption that the sexually abused child or adolescent, in the role of a student, is the culprit and wrongdoer, not the victim of the abuse. As a result, the abuse is regarded as a sin and fault, leading to the stigmatization of the sexually abused student and compensating for their shortcomings through expulsion from school, labelling them as dishonourable and subjecting them to condemnation. Instead of recognizing the victim as a victim and providing support from society and institutions, including the family and school, a pre-established alliance between society and the socializing institutions, the victim is presumed guilty and criminalized. The path of punishment from these institutions becomes smoother, and the perpetrator continues to exploit them.

Recommendations and Solutions

This section presents recommendations for preventing sexual abuse and treating victims. The evidence in this section comes from three main sources. The first source is the experience of individuals who have been abused. As people who have lived through the experience of abuse and its consequences, they possess insight that can be considered in policymaking. The second source is the suggestions of experts and specialists in fields like psychology, social work, women's studies, sociology, law, etc., who were interviewed. Due to their expertise and years of potential experience working with abuse victims, these specialists are a valuable source of knowledge. Finally, the third source is the academic literature on child abuse, reviewing which has been fruitful in enriching the recommendations. The suggestions are as follows:

Education and Awareness

Sexuality, before being related to instinct and biological behaviour, is influenced by the non-sexual realm (social norms and relationships, societal culture, etc.) which can be controlled through effective education (Peyvandi, 2019).

One of the points suggested by both abused children and specialists in this field, which is also present in the literature, is providing education and awareness to children and their families in sex education so that their knowledge and skills in dealing with the sexual abuse of children increases. As stated, 'Sex education begins in early childhood and continues into adolescence and adulthood. Its aim is to support and protect sexual development. It gradually equips children and adolescents with age-appropriate, culturally relevant and scientifically accurate information, skills and positive values to understand their sexuality and safely enjoy it later in life, develop caring and respectful relationships free from coercion, discrimination, sexual abuse, exploitation and intimate partner violence.' (World Health Organization, 2012: 1).

Many of the interviewed specialists, as well as a significant number of abused individuals, emphasized the importance of education and awareness activities in this regard and, consequently, the prevention of child sexual abuse. In this context, Dr Maurice Setudegan rightly pointed to working on four levels to prevent child sexual abuse, two of which emphasize the importance of education:

In my opinion, a major comprehensive system should be formed - in the macro-system, proper legislation should be enacted since laws can act as barriers and preventive measures. Another aspect is the mezzo-system, which includes schools, religious places, etc. They should provide proper education to children. The third is the micro-system, the small system, where more education should be provided in families, teaching fathers and mothers how to talk to their children about their bodies at certain times and tell them what to do if inappropriate touching occurs. These should be taught

in these three systems, and the fourth system, which I call the ecosystem, should have an external controlling role over these three systems.

Ms. J, a psychologist, spoke about the importance of education alongside treatment:

The cases I have mostly dealt with, I can say 99% happened due to unawareness, due to denying the issue of sexuality. Our families still don't want to accept that this has happened. The children were not educated. I remember when I was in first grade, I said if anyone wants to touch you... Then I saw someone yell out 'Is it bad what so-and-so does, touching my body parts, tickling me there? Is it bad?' This child was so unaware, and the family had not even told them that no one should touch their private parts. I recommend prevention and education on this issue, and I even think it should start from schools.

A female abuse victim who had studied architecture emphasized the importance of educating families:

I can only say raise the level of families' awareness, even before pregnancy. People think if they trust someone, they can leave their child with them, but that's not the case. I say this because I was a beautiful girl and would listen to what others said. My mom left me alone somewhere. She left me with so-and-so, and talked about my beauty, which didn't feel good to me because my mother wasn't by my side, and I saw a strange man saying how beautiful I am.

The director of the Iranian AIDS Association emphasized education and awareness through cinema. It can be said that making movies about child sexual abuse, prevention and coping strategies, and screening them in cinemas and on TV,

as he has suggested, can play a crucial role in reducing sexual abuse and dealing with it effectively:

Now in my opinion, art and cinema can help a lot in these cases. One of my interests is cinema, and I have written many scenarios about these issues. I think the impact that cinema can have on people... is really, really amazing. And it seems to me that if you agree, we can collaborate in this field. I'm forming a team on most social harms, even like suicide... Cinema can help. If one portrays these issues cinematically, not journalistically. Of course, cinema is considered media, but I mean cinema - if one can present this in the form of cinema, it can be the best assistance and culture building.

A social worker who was sexually abused by her grandfather as a child suggested simultaneous sex education and parenting style training for both parents and children:

Of course, one way is to educate children about sex. The right way of parenting these two together. When the father and mother's parenting is not authoritarian, overly permissive or too strict, and they want to educate the child's body, I don't think they will succeed. These two go together. Parenting should be proper, and sex education should not be based on what they already know but what they are taught. They definitely need training because at any age, explaining to my child takes a lot of skill. I ask my child what they already know. It is not possible to tell parents to go and give sex education to your child. They may end up sexually abusing the child and saying more than appropriate. This all has to be done with care.

The two main axes of the family system are the 'husband-wife relationship' and the 'parent-child relationship.' In both areas, sexuality is a central issue because controlling the body, sexual

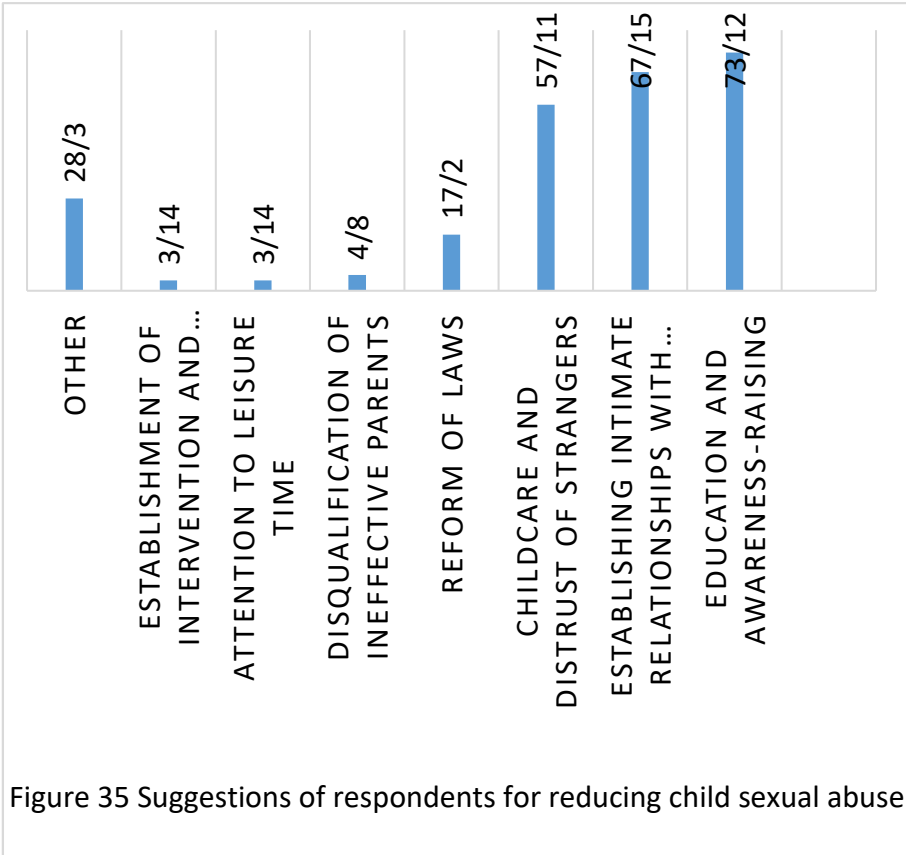
relationship, reproduction, reproducing the value system, taboos and prohibitions, and rules regarding children are among the main functions of the family (Peyvandi, 2019). The literature shows it is never too early to talk about sex education with children.

Talking to a child about sex education does not necessarily mean addressing stages of sexual development and the needs of each period. It entails meeting the child's psychological sexual needs with sufficient information, not more, as well as key points about self-protection against sexual abuse - not issues involving sexual relationships between two adults. This is an important point because many parents and adults are concerned that sex education exposes children to relationships not age-appropriate for them. It should be noted that sex education covers stages of sexual development, not issues related to sexual relationships.

Children are taught about their developing bodies and private parts so they know how to healthily approach sexuality as a normal part of life in adolescence and adulthood. Adolescence is a critical stage of human development where ignorance increases the likelihood of harm to the adolescent and the potential for the adolescent to harm someone younger and weaker. Discussing sexual issues, gender and the body in childhood helps children gain a proper understanding of sexual development and stages of growth.

Sexuality encompasses more than just sexual relationships. It includes children's feelings about their developing bodies and involves understanding and expressing emotions, intimacy, attraction, affection from and toward others, and maintaining mutually respectful relationships. Naturally, sex education should be provided to others who interact with children in various roles, like parents, teachers, kindergarten teachers, and anyone in regular contact with a child. Such education equips children, families, and other caregivers with proper knowledge and skills to first prevent sexual abuse from occurring, and second, respond appropriately if a child is abused and put that knowledge into action.

But who should provide and receive education, and what content should be taught? Families, children, and all members of society need education regarding sexuality. Of course, the type of instruction varies depending on age. In particular, children must be educated about the dangers that threaten them in this area. Governments bear the primary responsibility



for education. They should provide this education to children and their families through various mechanisms, including the education system. They should also identify and support children who have suffered harm in their family or support network. However, the government’s responsibility does not absolve other institutions and social organizations from playing a role. Families, local governments such as municipalities, and NGOs should also take the lead in education.

Content provision for society regarding sex education for children

In Iran, there is virtually no standard content available regarding sex education for children and their families based on general criteria. Governments to develop policies for producing and disseminating such content, and also provide an environment where researchers and interested parties can generate and publish this type of material. Given the opposition to the UN 2030 Development Agenda by hardliners, what is considered as an alternative, and in terms of protective laws, what provisions do they have in mind for children and students?

The Iranian government does not have the necessary competence in this area, similar to the document recently prepared and compiled in the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, which has received serious criticism. The most important criticism is that this document is not based on scientific findings and expert opinions of child rights advocates. Rather, it is an ideological document fraught with serious ambiguities and challenges. Therefore, in the absence of an effective government, child rights activists and NGOs can take on the responsibility of producing this type of content.

Training teachers, school staff, and officials on how to deal with child victims of sexual abuse

As shown in the previous chapter, in some cases, teachers, school staff, and officials are not only unable to support abused children but also further harm them through inappropriate actions. Therefore, it is necessary to hold training courses for them on how to engage with abused children so they can acquire the necessary skills. Also, since teachers, coaches, and school officials have extensive contact with students, they can use these relationships to identify signs in the behaviour and performance of abused children and refer them to support and treatment institutions.

Practical measures in schools to reduce sexual violence and other forms of violence

In some countries, including Iran, sexual relationships between teachers and students are not considered a serious offense, and policies related to sexual abuse in schools either do not exist or are not implemented. In recent years, some countries have enacted laws prohibiting sexual relationships between teachers and students. Such actions help reduce or eliminate sexual abuse in schools. At the same time, a broader range of measures is also needed, including changes in teacher training and recruitment and reform of curricula to transform gender relationships in schools.

Creating Supportive Spaces for Children's Growth and Protection

This is also one of the most effective ways to protect children from sexual abuse. Creating intimate relationships with children by parents leads to feelings of trust and security in them. This ensures that when a child is abused by the perpetrator, they have the confidence and security to report it to their support networks and caregivers. Part of this approach also applies to parents, meaning they should take good care of their children and not entrust them to others for care, whether for short or long periods. In this context, Nahal, who has experienced sexual abuse, talked about the importance of caring for children:

I don't think they should be like hawks hovering above the child. But they shouldn't give anyone such an opportunity. This can happen by both men and women. Parents should be vigilant. A memory came to my mind about myself. I was in seventh grade. Our neighbour's wife had a one-year-old girl. She left her with me and my mom had to go do something. I remembered that I liked when the kid touched my body. It doesn't matter if it's a girl or boy. Parents themselves should be careful. Some experience it but can't digest it. Some like me move past it. The more awareness you give the child,

the more they can shout, the more courage you give, the better. What is very deterring is the parents' care.

Dr Hasani Abhariyan also emphasized the importance of protecting children from threats and providing education:

In medicine, we say prevention comes before treatment. There are many things we can't avoid so we can't treat them either. Society is full of wolves, of people who intentionally or due to illness are not good for us and our children, who take advantage of us, not just sexually. There is financial abuse, sexual abuse. Society is full of exploitation. What should we do? Care is of two kinds. One is during childhood and the first phase - don't send the child alone anywhere, don't trust anyone, watch over your child. Don't have unwarranted trust. And the other is cultural - we must teach our child to say no, tell them they have personal boundaries and no one has the right to touch them. This happens all over the world and should happen in Iran too. If someone does this, loudly say stop, don't touch, and then report that someone did such a thing. This education must be provided. As they grow older, they should receive personal defence training. We have a period in our education system called guidance school which wasn't meaningless. The child goes through three phases and should at least learn the minimum during this guidance phase - why was it called guidance? The child should learn to be guided towards social life, self-protection, even personal defines and martial arts training. If they are going to become familiar with sexual issues, the most important time is this period. If they are going to learn life skills, assertiveness, self-confidence, it starts from elementary school but should be completed here. We are missing out on the most critical period which is puberty. It's the most important

time in a child's life. If we provide the training and are confident, we can trust they can defend themselves. This is a very important issue, being defenceless and passive. If you raise a child this way and they experience it, they will be submissive. They'll only say it's not your fault. If we observe this and they speak up, others will also realize.

Ms. B, who was sexually abused by her uncle in childhood, says:

I think if they can be intimate enough with the family to tell them, well, it will provide them with support.

Amir, who was abused by his sports coach, speaks of the major problems he faced after the abuse - that he was unaware of how to report the abuse experience to others. In other words, his lack of awareness was the result of not receiving any education. Therefore, he suggests education for families, teachers, children, and most importantly, an intimate relationship between parents to prevent and deal with abuse effectively:

Self-care and sex education training for families can be very effective, and the issue is that many people have endured this now, so we must be more vigilant for the next generation - what can we do so fewer victims are taken and innocent children affected. In those circumstances, I didn't know who to tell or where to seek help, and I felt very unsupported and vulnerable. I didn't even know how to get myself out of the predicament - school was not a safe place either where I could tell the teacher or principal and get help. It is very important that they also know about these issues and become aware, and also tell the kids. Teachers and principals should also be trained, and most importantly, the intimacy of parents with children can be very helpful, so kids can more easily tell their mom and dad their secrets and get help appropriately.

Caring for children and not trusting others

As the evidence in this study and other research shows, abusers encompass a broad spectrum of individuals, from strangers to relatives, but most abuse occurs by those who have some connection to the child. It is necessary for parents not to automatically trust any person when leaving their child with them, even acquaintances and relatives. A range of suggestions also focus on caring for children by parents and not trusting others to leave children with them. A 25-year-old woman who was abused by her brother in childhood says:

They should not trust their sons and should not leave their daughters alone with any man. That man can be anyone - she should not be alone because men do not have self-control, and they are not in charge when that feeling takes over them - they don't care if it is their sister, mother, or anyone else. In my opinion, no girl should be alone with a man, ever.

Although what this woman says does not apply to all men, since this was her lived experience, she has generalized it to everyone.

Narges, 25 years old, who was abused by her uncle, says:

They should not leave children alone with a man. Not even his brother, uncle, or father. I'm telling you this. Do not leave their daughter at home alone with any man, even if it is the closest person to her, her father.

Reforming laws and effectively implementing them

Iran does not have a specific law regarding sexual abuse, and the provisions of existing laws conflict with each other. Participants' perspectives on the law revolved around issues like lack of legal protections, failure to implement provisions, and the patriarchal nature of laws. Therefore, an effective law needs to be drafted in this area that can somehow both support abused individuals and pave the way for the reintegration of abusers into society. It is necessary for these laws to be based

on scientific findings, social norms, and the experiences of pioneering countries in this field.

The meaningful participation of child rights experts and advocates is another essential point in formulating these laws. Additionally, the punitive perspective in laws needs to change and be replaced by a restorative approach as part of a process of enabling abusers to return to society.

Enacting laws alone is not enough - effective mechanisms must be designed and implemented for proper law enforcement. The existence of competent institutions to manage interactions, effective social norms and tendencies, the expansion of empathy and care for others, open and equitable punishment, understanding the constraints imposed by biology and technology - all contribute to relieving social distress, resolving conflicts of interest, and fostering desirable social outcomes in people's interactions.

Ms. H, a women's studies expert, commented on legal issues and the need for legal reform:

Over the years of experience I have gained, I realized that the law that currently exists in the country has many flaws - it not only fails to provide protection but also has a protective aspect for the abuser. Their opinion is that the prevailing law in Iran is very gendered; therefore, the issue of law, especially against sexual violence, must always remain silent, and the victim himself may be more likely to be harmed [...]. You are also seeing how problematic issues like sexual abuse and honour killings are, and worst of all, child marriage and marriage at an age that is completely unacceptable and incomprehensible. Well, this is directly sexual violence, but the shortage of law is still protective of this sexual phenomenon. Another case that exists in our law and is in serious need of reform is the guardianship of the father and paternal grandfather which is still considered - this is the biggest flaw. Because it is possible that this sexual

abuse is taking place within the same paternal family or by the father. But because there is a legal flaw, this phenomenon still exists. Because in practice, the decision maker for this individual, whether for their marriage or other issues that arise for the child, is not the law but the father and paternal family.

Ms. K have identified serious issues with the law, such as lack of protection for the victim, child marriage as a form of sexual violence, patriarchy in the law, and the like, which need to be reformed.

One of the essential legal matters concerning abusers is their punishment, for which severe penalties up to execution are stipulated in the law. Harsh punishment has brought serious issues. For example, in some cases, as shown, the abuser is a relative or family member of the child. This deters them from reporting the abuse experience for the treatment of the victim and perpetrator due to fear of punishment, which exacerbates the problem and its harmful consequences. In some cases, the abusive act results from a provocative move or slip on the part of the abuser rather than a preconceived plan, so punishment can have dire implications. Therefore, laws in this area need to fundamentally shift from a punitive to a restorative and supportive approach and facilitate the reintegration of abusers into society through a process.

Increasing the marriage age of children

Many countries have enacted laws setting the minimum age for marriage at 18, coupled with initiatives to address the root causes facilitating child marriages, including economic hardship and long-standing cultural traditions that perpetuate this practice. Despite the prevalence of these marriages in Iran, social norms oppose it, and increasing the marriage age has been on the parliamentary agenda but cancelled under pressure from interest groups. Therefore, it is imperative to increase the marriage age to 18 in Iran as in all progressive countries worldwide, given the awareness of the numerous harms of child marriage and society's opposition to this form

of marriage in the country. In this regard, one specialist in the field has stated:

Look, I have reviewed almost all studies conducted in Iran on child marriage, and they have all shown many adverse effects on children's biological, psychological, and social levels. ... sexual relations in these marriages are a form of sexual violence against children or rape. Therefore, it is necessary for the marriage age in Iran to increase like all leading countries worldwide and reach 18 years.

Paying attention to leisure time is another suggestion to reduce child sexual abuse. One participant proposed:

It is necessary to fill children's leisure time with the cooperation of schools and parents.

When children's leisure time is filled effectively, they are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviours. Also, there will be fewer opportunities for children to experience abuse. For example, a child who is home alone is more likely to enter quasi-public spaces - spaces where the child grows up away from parental and other caregiver oversight and monitoring. Accordingly, the likelihood of them becoming a victim of sexual abuse increases.

Establishing intervention and treatment centres with a focus on high-risk areas

In various sections, it was explained how the lack of effective treatment for sexual abuse can have irreparable consequences for children at all stages of their lives. Therefore, it is necessary to establish various treatment centres in the form of a health network and psychological and social work clinics. It is also necessary for specialists to be trained professionally so that they can better help or treat sexually abused children. Unfortunately, in our country at present, there are no specific centres dedicated to providing services to victims of sexual abuse, and abuse victims eager for treatment are desperate to

find specialists in this field. In this context, the director of one of the branches of the Imam Ali Society has stated:

You see, in places where drug use is highly prevalent, this issue is clearly confirmed and so on. Support and emergency bases must exist at the location of the incident, and especially in schools, there should be a social work base there. If children directly or indirectly express this, rapid interventions must happen - those responsible must be aware that this is a form of harm. As long as the child lives with their parents in that neighbourhood, even for middle-class families, this issue exists - it may even come from the family. But I'm saying those who read such stories must be educated on encountering them, and awareness must be provided to children on where they may end up and where to report it, and secondly, the treatment of this issue, which is not advanced in schools, etc. For example, a 15-year-old whose family had thrown her out became a sex worker - legally, nothing could be pursued, meaning they say after that, neither treatment nor follow-up is possible, or it may further harm the child.

Counseling, treatment, and group support following sexual abuse, especially in cases where complex factors are involved in the abuse process, can be beneficial. Evidence suggests that a cognitive-behavioural program that is prepared and implemented after abuse can improve the speed of recovery from psychological trauma caused by the trauma (Foa et al., 1995; Foa and Street, 2001). As evidence has shown, in some cases, sexual abuse survivors blame themselves as a result of the abuse experience, and addressing this issue in psychotherapy is crucial for significant improvement (Meyer and Taylor, 1986).

Empowering poor and at-risk families

As mentioned and described, one of the causal factors of sexual abuse is the poverty of families. The government must design and implement effective empowerment and support programs for lower economic deciles, especially the bottom three deciles. Of course, these programs need to pay special attention to vulnerable families at risk, such as those with drug abuse disorders and female-headed households. Some participants' perspectives also focused on empowering poor families. Ms. M., a psychologist, has suggested:

Providing more financial support and education to families under the Welfare Organization's supervision who receive monthly payments so they can really take care of their children can help more. Rape itself is an issue between two people, but what causes it requires much more discussion. Much more fundamental work needs to be done on this matter.

Ms. K. has also emphasized empowering deprived families and women:

Raising families' awareness, especially trying to be a voice for the voiceless at home - children and women - supporting them so they can stand up to the abuser, plus providing this information that can help them identify the issue. But sometimes we see mothers coming and saying yes, this is happening to my child, but what can I do? I cannot have any support. So here, mothers need to be told about their power - how influential they can be - empowering and informing them, and providing them with sufficient power.

In the above quote, Ms. K. points to two very important aspects of preventing and treating child sexual abuse: First, she refers to empowerment, which has various dimensions like skills, economic, psychological, etc. An empowered human and woman can defend their rights and participate in society.

The second aspect involves advocating for those whose voices are often unheard. Within society, certain marginalized groups face obstacles that prevent their concerns from reaching governmental bodies and authorities. These marginalized communities encounter numerous challenges and injustices but lack the means to effectively communicate their needs to policymakers. Hence, civil rights activists play a crucial role in amplifying the voices of these groups, addressing a range of issues such as child sexual abuse, to ensure their concerns are heard by decision-makers and influence policy outcomes.

Empowering NGOs

Today in Iran, NGOs have become one of the essential areas for identifying, resolving, or treating children's issues. Thus, their role regarding child sexual abuse is doubly important in the absence of an effective government. NGOs have several critical responsibilities in this area. First, providing the ground for sex education for children and their families, and second, identifying at-risk and abused children, providing them with support and effective treatment, or referring them to appropriate centres.

These responsibilities are significant for NGOs since many of them operate in deprived and marginalized areas. However, due to government warnings, many of these centres refrain from entering the field of sex education and identifying and treating such individuals.

Strengthening safe houses for women at risk of violence

In Iran, safe houses have been established with the support of philanthropists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide refuge for women who have experienced abuse and domestic violence in their homes. These safe houses aim to protect the lives of these women and their children, who were previously unsafe in their own homes. After leaving home, they have nowhere to take refuge and can enter a safe house, reducing the chance of serious harm. Safe houses are currently the only immediate option in the country that can be recommended to victims using a proper legal approach that is quick and comprehensive.

Special attention to adolescence

In discussions concerning children, adolescent topics, particularly puberty, have often been overlooked. Puberty represents a crucial phase in a child's development. Research across biological, psychological, and sociological fields indicates that children undergo substantial changes in these areas during this period. These changes can disrupt their regulatory systems, making them more susceptible to sexual vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is essential to offer specialized education on puberty and sexual matters within schools and other institutions. Additionally, experiencing sexual abuse can lead to premature maturation, potentially perpetuating further abuse, highlighting the importance of addressing this issue in policies and programs.

Ms. Sattari, a psychologist, states:

Adolescence is a critical stage of growth - it would be great if parents don't spare their own care and leave younger children with each other and alone together, especially if they have a younger child at home. They should certainly provide self-care training for the younger child. Also, sex education and awareness of puberty and the sexual needs of this critical stage.

Serious attention to broken families

Children in broken families are very much at risk of sexual abuse. We also know that over the past 15 years, the family in Iran has faced fundamental challenges, and new forms have emerged, including single-parent families and those where children live with stepfathers and stepmothers. These can expose more children to harm. Therefore, governments and civil society must develop the necessary programs and mechanisms to protect children in such families, particularly those at risk. Much of these mechanisms should also focus on preventing victimization. Some suggestions are provided below:

Creating prevention campaigns

These campaigns seek to change attitudes toward sexual violence using advertisements in the media and cities and neighbourhoods. This method has been used in many countries, including African countries, leading to increased awareness (Njuanake *et al.*, 1996). The United Nations' initiative to combat gender-based violence in 16 Latin American and Caribbean countries is underway. This campaign is designed to:

- Increase community awareness of the human, social and economic costs of violence against women and girls;
- Build capacity at the governmental level to formulate and implement laws against sexual violence;
- Strengthen networks of governmental and private organizations to design and implement effective programs to prevent violence against women and girls (Mehrotra *et al.*, 2000).

Planning for offenders to prevent further abuse

Such programs have recently been implemented and evaluated in industrialized countries. The reaction of male offenders has been to deny responsibility. For these programs to be effective, they must be induced in some way to accept responsibility for their actions (Kaufman, 2001). One way to achieve this is through programs that target male offenders, not victims, to collaborate on campaigns against sexual violence. This would produce a combination of education, cultural critique, and social activism.

Ultimately, the following topics should be on the agenda for future research to produce sufficient knowledge in this area:

- This study reviewed some legal issues in Iranian law, but there is still extensive work to be done in this area. Legal experts need to meticulously examine the gaps and problems in Iran's laws on this issue, conduct comparative research, and study the outcomes of different laws in other countries to ultimately propose appropriate models for Iranian society. Additionally,

legal experts and social workers can conduct research based on existing case files and judges' experiences.

- Society's reaction to sexual abuse in general and the perspectives of victims and perpetrators on child sexual abuse, its continuation, and treatment are very important. Therefore, sociologists and anthropologists should identify and categorize these reactions in another study and propose appropriate models for society to respond to and address sexual abuse in general and child sexual abuse in particular.
- One of the significant issues and gaps in Iran is the lack of evidence-based and ethical guidelines for treating victims of sexual abuse. Thus, social workers and psychologists should research this area and develop treatment guides and protocols.
- Religious scholars can conduct religious and jurisprudential studies within the Shia jurisprudence framework on this issue and propose religious and legal innovations considering social norms and customs.
- Other research should study perpetrators, the causes and motives behind their abuse, and ultimately propose appropriate models for preventing abuse and treatment focused on offenders.
- Precisely identifying the biological and psychological factors and effects of sexual abuse requires rigorous medical and psychological research studies. Therefore, specialists in this field need to conduct in-depth empirical research.

Recommendations at the Intermediate, Macro and Structural Levels for Rehabilitation, Reform, Reduction and Prevention

The scope of the incest taboo law, which is one of the most powerful social laws, varies from culture to culture throughout history, taking on different forms that indicate its cultural and social rather than natural and biological basis. If sexual relations with relatives were naturally abhorrent to humans,

human societies would not have prohibited their members from it so adamantly. What highlights its pathological aspect is not the resultant sexual relationship itself, but rather the abuse of power and dominance over groups lacking power to impose sexual desires in the form of assault on the body and existential integrity of the individual within the family. This causes severe physical, psychological and trauma, especially in later developmental stages for children, depending on the type of forced sexual activity, the nature of familial and kinship relationships between the parties involved, and the age and gender of the parties.

Since sexual abuse encompasses a wide range of behaviours, finding a precise definition suited to the social and cultural conditions of societies is an arduous and fruitless task. What is objectively and practically necessary is creating grounds for educating children who are potentially vulnerable to abuse in the family and society. This education is a kind of inoculation for the present and future well-being of children and society. Since accessing potential offenders is difficult and nearly impossible, educating society in general and children through virtual networks, educational institutions, city billboards, pamphlets, media advertisements, radio and television, utilizing artistic aspects, etc. is the most cost-effective and efficient mechanism in the short term.

Although implementing solutions given Iran's ideological foundations poses serious challenges and barriers, the dawn of enlightenment that the Zhina movement has created in Iran since September 2022 will reshape the status quo of the retrograde, anti-woman authoritarian political structure in a different way.

Alongside its central slogan of 'Woman, Life, Freedom,' this movement brings together the most civic demands and participation of all spectra of society within Iran, plus accompaniment of international civil society. It paves ways for radical change in the ideology-driven oppressive structure and prepares the ground for cultural transformations. In such a context, with the changes that have occurred, we can hopefully expect amendments to patriarchal, oppressive laws since up to now, the most motivating force behind any kind of

encroachment, sexual violence and assault against women and children has been actualized under discriminatory laws derived from jurisprudence and religion and their enforcement under the supervision of the patriarchal judiciary. In such a context, with the changes that have occurred, we can hopefully expect amendments to patriarchal, oppressive laws. Up until now, discriminatory laws derived from jurisprudence and religion, enforced under the supervision of the patriarchal judiciary, have served as the most significant driving force behind any form of encroachment, sexual violence, and assault against women and children. With the collapse of this oppressive structure, a substantial portion of these tribulations will gradually be alleviated.

The cultural dimension, which has taken root in the ancient tradition of society, can be reformed through educational systems and developing awareness at various levels from the grassroots level. Nevertheless, regarding rehabilitation, reform, reduction and prevention of child sexual abuse, some of the issues raised at the intermediate, macro and structural levels are noted:

- Education and planning to eradicate the roots of patriarchal culture and eliminate barriers to legal equality for women and children by identifying and educating against inhumane dominant values in a patriarchal society.
- Pressuring ruling and judicial bodies through civil institutions to implement the provisions of the 2030 document.
- Demanding awareness in the field of children's rights and eliminating encroachment and violation of their sanctity at home, school and society by expanding the free flow of information.
- Assisting children and women to break the psychological atmosphere that forces them into silence.
- Securing public spaces in society and teaching social and personal awareness to children through educational

institutions to actively deal with abuse at home and in society.

- Eliminating the property-centred culture and the value of virginity as a criterion for evaluating women, so girls who have been raped do not enter into forced and child marriages out of fear for their honour.
- Urgent and serious review of the cultural, social and economic status of a society caught between the contradictions of traditional and modern structures and victimizing groups lacking power, a society where children are considered part of parental property, warranting any behaviour including sexual assault, physical punishment, abuse, violence and murder.
- Immediate reform of society's intellectual and cultural foundations regarding the sanctification of parents and eliminating this dangerous ideological patriarchal view from the institution of the family.
- Education and culture building that parental powers and actions should be limited to respecting their children's fundamental rights rather than an instrumental, proprietary approach.
- Community-based family education to familiarize them with new cultural values and the speed of changing social norms that have led to ideological and intellectual conflicts between parents and children.
- Training on managing one's body, self-control, self-respect and respect for others, controlling anger and excitement and psychological pressure and severe irritation that leads to abnormal behaviour, with the cooperation of macro and micro institutions across society, the media, social networks, etc.
- Promoting the idea that children belong to the public sphere, not the private family sphere that considers itself the owner of the child's life, in which case any parental abuse towards the child should be challenged by the whole of society, rather than considering parents immune from any crime concerning the child.

- Continuous and serious education of children on how to protect themselves and when to seek help.
- Immediate review of laws related to children and sexual abuse and violence against them, which lacked the necessary deterrent from the outset.
- Helping increase children's self-awareness in understanding themselves and their needs through institutions, schools, city billboards, and organizing localized street performances on this topic.
- Making citizens and officials aware through continuous educational programs of the human dignity of all ages and genders, emphasizing abolishing false gender differentiations and rejecting proprietary, instrumental views of children, women and marginalized groups.
- Taking radical action to reject and eliminate patriarchal, oppressive ideologies and beliefs that take an objectifying view of children.
- Promoting a culture of peaceful discourse instead of one of gender confrontation and differentiation in family and society, aiming to create security for exposing and reporting sexual abuse and violence if they occur.
- Promoting a culture of self-criticism throughout individual and social life from childhood to adulthood to strengthen one's character and resilience against humiliation from abuse and intimidation with threats to honour, shame, and prestige, and devaluing these phenomena of traditional patriarchal society.
- Attempting through civil society pressure on lawmakers and enforcers to reduce the gap between Islamic jurisprudential laws and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Creating effective organic coordination between the school system, law, medicine and social work, and developing curricula for them to identify and assist abused children while maintaining confidentiality and ensuring their safety.

- Strengthening specialized, not nominal or formal, social work offices in the judiciary and establishing such offices in schools, medical and social emergency services, city and village neighbourhoods.
- Establishing a Council for the Protection of Children's Rights in the Judiciary comprising experts in psychology, sociology, behaviourism, law.
- Planning education and promoting understanding among jurists of people's everyday living culture so they can act up to date when enforcing the law.
- Training specialized lawyers to advocate for issues related to sexual assault in the public (institutions) and private (family) spheres.
- Training and advocating against sexual abuse and violence at the city level, in the media, on social networks.
- Using experienced and aware coaches and officials on psychological issues in kindergartens and schools.
- Educating and raising students' awareness about controlling relationships and dos and don'ts of interaction in family and society and clarifying sexual health.
- Challenging the approach of Iran's ruling political system in social/virtual media that considers gender equality and education on the contents of the 2030 document an imported Western and Zionist conspiracy.
- Attempting to accelerate the secularization of civil laws and enforcement of punishments for perpetrators of sexual abuse and violence by creating campaigns and protest groups and making demands through trusted grassroots groups and international pressures.
- Women's movements and activists in Iran paying attention to family issues and the sexual nature of girls as future women and mothers of society, aiming to break the cycle of reproducing violence, sexual and physical abuse, child marriage, etc.

- Cultural management by artistic, athletic and scientific leaders based on denying the value-laden halos and norms surrounding concepts of honour and stripping the sanctity and sacredness from the dominant literature and beliefs about the institution of family and marriage.
- Teaching resistance against the negation of children's agency and the Iranian government and law's systematic dehumanizing approach that considers the father the guardian and children objects of any proprietary act.
- Creating sensitivity in public health institutions like the Ministry of Health, Welfare Organization, social work, etc. towards intervening in family crises, violence and sexual assaults.
- Public rethinking and education on using 'courage' and resistance against the offender, not blaming the victim, creating insecurity for the offender so they do not dare to encroach under the victim's silence.
- Establishing counselling centres for group therapy of abuse victims to prevent harm consequences, and group therapy for identified perpetrators to understand the reasons, contexts and mechanisms of persisting abusive actions and contribute to their improvement.
- Spreading awareness through virtual space towards rejecting hypocritical ethics that create taboos about femininity and thus conceal rape behind the veil of shame, honour, prestige, chastity, etc.
- Establishing dedicated hotlines for reporting sexual assault and family abuse while maintaining safety principles.

A Review of Some Key Strategies and Recommendations

1. Objective understanding of childhood and adolescence as a social phenomenon with new research and

sociological approaches, not just from a psychological and developmental perspective.

2. The need to study sexual abuse by gender and age group (childhood and adolescence), due to the different causality and consequences.
3. Welfare and educational policymaking focused on the Iranian family through the interaction of government, NGOs and support bodies, aiming to mitigate multidimensional deprivation, raise parental awareness about protected sexual relationships, strengthen responsibility and care for children and adolescents, and critically review socialization and parenting styles with gender stereotypes and biases.
4. Institutional policymaking for structured, timely support of sexually abused children in terms of custody (substitute family institution), long-term, multidimensional social work and counselling services, and systematic, continuous monitoring.
5. Strengthening sociology of emotions studies focused on critically analysing dominant emotions in Iranian society (shame, fear, guilt, anger, humiliation, sorrow, etc.) and their connection to customary values (honour and reputation) and the institutionalized reward and punishment system in the socialization process and educational structure of the Iranian family and other social institutions.
6. Exploring the mechanism of denial and projection at all levels of society and social institutions and its relationship with customary values and dominant cultural emotions in Iranian society.
7. Welfare and educational policy focused specifically on single-parent and single-guardian families for preventing sexual abuse which is prevalent in such contexts.
8. Regional and local policymaking regarding poverty by changing the approach to poverty as social exclusion and multidimensional fundamental deprivation

underlying various deprivations, and monitoring vulnerable spaces through three-dimensional planning for these spaces as referenced in the text and model.

9. Reviewing the legal structure and approaches to sexual abuse and enforcing them with the aim of proposing preventive policies from a legal perspective and adopting legal and judicial measures regarding sexual abuse, resolving ambiguities in categorizing children and adolescents, clarifying and critiquing gendered approaches in this legal discourse, and eliminating its entanglement with jurisprudential discourse and pathology of its implementing bodies.
10. Teaching life skills and promoting healthy communication skills (with emphasis on two skills - anger management and saying no - and their aetiology) in joint parent-child workshops to prevent sexual victimization and perpetration, focusing on developing media programs with a critical, realistic approach to clarify and teach these skills to parents, children and adolescents.
11. Focusing the research area on commonalities and connections between social issues and harms including the relationship of addiction, poverty, emotional divorce, prostitution, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, theft, etc. with sexual abuse and emphasizing incest in an interdisciplinary and novel approach to utilize the resulting strategies in Iran's cultural and social policymaking.
12. Developing special supportive policies for specific, distinct groups of children and adolescents such as the disabled, mentally challenged, etc. to prevent their sexual victimization, and also developing and implementing non-discriminatory, supportive policies regarding migrant (Afghan) children and families from the perspective of measuring factors influencing their sexual abuse and mitigating it.
13. Analysing the mechanisms and functions of the dominant moral approach in constructing the victim as

the culprit and sinner and the process of objectification and internalization of these mechanisms by the victim themselves in future studies and research.

14. The need for comparative study in applying the denial mechanism in two groups - female and male abuse victims - and measuring its factors by monitoring dominant societal discourses and their consequences.
15. Fundamental, practical changes in the educational structure of schools (including greater interaction with the family institution and home) and strengthening their counselling capacity from the perspective of preventing sexual abuse of children and adolescents by promoting transparency, avoiding denial and providing a trusting, supportive discourse space and referring abused students to support bodies.

In conclusion, addressing the complex issue of child sexual abuse, particularly incest, requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses legal reforms, cultural shifts, educational initiatives, and societal awareness. The recommendations outlined in this document span from macro-level policy changes to grassroots educational efforts, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive strategy to combat this pervasive problem. By focusing on empowering children, reforming patriarchal structures, and fostering open dialogue, we can work towards creating a safer environment for the most vulnerable members of our society. The recent societal changes in Iran, sparked by the Zhina movement, offer a glimmer of hope for transformative change. It is our sincere hope that these recommendations will be seriously considered and implemented, paving the way for a future where children are protected, respected, and allowed to thrive free from the threat of sexual abuse.

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This groundbreaking book by Kameel Ahmady and his team delves deep into the harrowing and often hidden issue of child sexual abuse in Iran, with a particular focus on incest. "Taboo and Secrecy" combines rigorous research with poignant fieldwork, shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions of this sensitive subject. This book not only highlights the prevalence and impact of child sexual abuse but also calls for urgent reforms and preventive measures. By advocating for education, awareness, and legal protection, it aims to foster a safer environment for children in Iran and beyond. "Taboo and Secrecy" is an essential read for policymakers, educators, social workers, and anyone committed to understanding and combating child sexual abuse. Its evidence-based approach and heartfelt narratives make it a powerful tool for advocacy and change.

