

## A study of child abuse trend in Saudi Arabia – A review update

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### Abstract

Child abuse is a reality in all cultural, ethnic, and income groups. Our comprehensive review provides a feedback that it is still a global problem of considerable extent. Child abuse can be physical, emotional - verbal, sexual or through neglect. Keeping in mind the sensitivity of the issue an attempt was made to assess the different forms and magnitude of child abuse across the country by reviewing articles published on this topic in the past 25 years. It was found that child abuse is still an unfortunate problem in Saudi Arabia and its prevalence is a cause of concern both for the government and the healthcare agencies. Also, the incidents are reported much less than actual occurrence mostly due to either the innocence of the victim or the callousness and insensitivity of investigating agencies. The government initiated the National Family Safety Program (NFSP) in 2005 with the intention to prevent child abuse and provide preventive education to the population.

**Keywords:** Child abuse, Emotional abuse, Physical abuse, Sexual abuse, Saudi Arabia.

### Introduction

Child abuse is a chronic public health problem and a stigma to the society which is worldwide in its occurrence but severely underreported. Since the earlier reports from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia we have come to realize that such occurrence is not alien to this society.<sup>1</sup> In 1999, the WHO Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention drafted the following definition: "Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power". In 2002 the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized Child abuse and neglect as a global problem, manifested in different forms and deeply rooted in cultures.<sup>2</sup> A report by World Health Organization in the year 2000 attributed approximately 57000 deaths among children less than 15 years of age to homicide. Global estimates of child homicide suggest that infants and very young children are at greatest risk, with rates for the 0–4-year-old age group more than double those of 5–14-year-olds.<sup>2,3</sup> The first reported case of Child abuse and neglect in Saudi Arabia occurred in 1990(7). Until the 1990s, cases of child abuse and neglect went unpublished by medical professionals in Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, some have alleged that the inability or unwillingness of physicians to acknowledge the possibility that parents could abuse their children was the reason why it was hidden for so long.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, recent papers published in Saudi Arabia have reported a continuous increase in the number of such cases annually.<sup>4</sup> Local media started publishing news on such occurrences and thus uncovering the existence of child abuse in the

conservative community. This led to the establishment of governmental and non-governmental agencies for prevention of child abuse.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the Saudi National Health Council (NHC) approved the hospital-based child protection teams (CPTs) project proposed by the NFSP and since then, 39 CPTs have been founded in major hospitals across the 13 provinces of Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup> The law of mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect cases for healthcare professionals was endorsed in 2008 by the Minister of Health which also issued a notification to all hospitals in Saudi Arabia. Failure to report a CAN case subjects professional to penalties, including fine or work suspension or both, according to the Saudi Health Practice Bylaw.<sup>6</sup>

This study attempts to explore the contents of the published articles\ reports on child abuse in Saudi Arabia from scientific journals and to provide an overview of the extent of the problem and the summative estimates of prevalence of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of children, identifying areas and gaps for further research and program development.

### Methods

#### Search Strategy

This review was based on studies published between 1991 and 2015 in English language. These were primarily observational, analytical studies (prevalence and incidence), case reports and reviews and guidelines-based reports from central Governments. The inclusion criteria were that:

1. The study related in full or in part to young children.
2. Prevalence studies of child abuse at home and in school in Saudi Arabia.
3. Studies on risk factors associated with child abuse

4. Outcome measures were assessed based on interventions to reduce the prevalence of child abuse.

Electronic searches were the main method of selecting articles via the medline, pubmed, google scholar and the Cochrane library. Apart from this a manual search was also done on relevant books, journals, indexes, and abstracts to extract the required information.

Certain keywords defined the search criteria to make it more specific and accurate like child abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, child maltreatment, child emotional abuse, child neglect, violence against children, shaken baby syndrome, Münchhausen's syndrome by proxy (MSP) and Saudi Arabia. Articles fulfilling the above criteria were first selected and their abstracts scanned to ensure that it is suitable for inclusion into the study.

The data extraction process from the review articles were done based on a selection form having categories like bibliographic identification and source of study; demographic characteristics, description of the study, type of study, study population, evaluation and analysis, and recommendations.

Finally, the quality of the study was ensured based on an overall assessment of the article, the appropriateness of the study design and methods in relation to the objectives stated. A total of 55 articles were researched out of which 21 articles were considered flawed and thus rejected based on inconclusive findings in them. From these 34 articles again 22 articles were excluded to include 12 articles on child abuse which were from Saudi Arabia.

All the data was entered in IBM SPSS Statistics ver. 23.0.0.0 64-bit edition and descriptive analysis done.

## Result and Discussion

Child abuse is a globally prevalent phenomenon. It is an unknown entity in this part of the world and slowly emerging as a key public health problem due to a fast pace of modernization and industrialization.<sup>7</sup>

Saudi Arabia has begun recognizing the existence of such a problem and this would be a good beginning to make it a focal point of substantial public and governmental attention.<sup>4</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, majority of the people remain numb about this issue. This silence is due to the fear of indignity, denial from the community, social stigma and gap in communication between parents and children about this issue.<sup>10</sup> In 1991 in a landmark article, Al-Eissa described seven children ranging from five months to seven years of age who had suffered from child abuse and neglect.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Jumaah et al 1993, reported Münchhausen Syndrome by proxy (MBP) and a female with mouth

ulcers whose mother was using flash caustic lye occurred in Riyadh.<sup>12</sup>

Kattan H reported 3 cases of physical abuse, 1 case of sexual abuse and 4 case of neglect.<sup>13</sup>

In 1998, Ibrahim H et al, conducted study in Riyadh and found 4 cases of physical abuse, 3 cases of sexual abuse, 4 cases of neglect and 1 case of Münchhausen syndrome. The pattern of physical abuse ranged from mild trauma to severe head injury. The perpetrators of physical abuse were mostly parents.<sup>1</sup>

Roy D et al in 1999 found 1 case of physical abuse by stepmother.<sup>14</sup> Elkerdany, et al 1999 reported two cases of child abuse in Jubail, eastern province of Saudi Arabia. Perpetrators were parents.<sup>15</sup> Elkerday et al.<sup>15</sup> and Roy et al.<sup>14</sup> point to inexperience or lack of knowledge of physicians in dealing with abuse cases. Others, such as Al-Angari<sup>16</sup> blame the lack of visibility or discussion of the problem in conservative Saudi society.

In 2000, Karthikeyan et al. published a case report discussing 2 physical abuse cases and 1 case of sexual abuse in Khamis Mushayt in the south of Saudi Arabia. Injuries included fractures, bruises, bite marks, bilateral retinal hemorrhage, cerebral contusion, subdural hematoma, cerebral infarction, and one child died. Injuries in sexual abuse included anal tear and painful anal introitus.<sup>17</sup> In 2007, Al-Mahroos reported 24 cases of physical abuse, 6 cases of sexual abuse, 6 cases of neglect and 4 case of Münchhausen syndrome.<sup>18</sup>

In 2010 Al Eissa reported 65 cases of physical abuse, 43 cases of neglect, 20 cases of sexual abuse and 5 cases of neglect. Parents were perpetrators in most of the cases. Such high case was due to mandatory reporting and data collection strategies.<sup>19</sup>

The variation in proportions by location could be explained by differences in examining centers and the fact that social perceptions of abuse types can affect the number of reported cases.<sup>20</sup> In 2012 Osama et al reported 87 cases of child abuse in which 74 cases were of sexual abuse followed by physical and other types of abuse. The mean age of the victims was 11.04 ± 5 years. In all the studies analyzed it was found that most of the offenders were strangers not known to the victim, while the most common type of injury reported were bruises. Most victims were females (56.3%), but male victims were 43.7% of the population.<sup>21</sup> Elarousy et al conducted study in 2013 in Jeddah and reported 54 cases of psychological abuse, which have been least commonly reported among all forms of abuse in recent years. Chronic illness was positively correlated with terrorizing emotional abuse.<sup>22</sup> Al-Eissa et al in 2015 studied 2043 cases and found 1175 cases of physical abuse, 287 case of sexual abuse, 1533 case of psychological abuse, and 1021 case of neglect. Al Eissa et al found that females were at greater risk of victimization for physical and psychological abuse. It is because of social norms that protect girls and keep their proximity to caregivers, at the same time they provide

boys with more freedom thus predisposing them to a greater risk of sexual victimization.<sup>23,24</sup>

The National Family Safety Program (NFSP) was established in 2005 with the intention to prevent child maltreatment and domestic violence in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as shown in Table 2.

The National Family Safety register (NFSR) reported that the majority of the victims are Saudi children. Physical maltreatment and neglect were slightly more common among boys.<sup>26,27</sup> On the other hand, sexual as well as emotional maltreatment was more common among girls (60.7%)<sup>24-26</sup> External injuries included: bruises 29.8% and abrasions. Parents represented most of the perpetrators in child maltreatment cases (60%), followed by other caregivers. Most of the reported cases were from the three main regions: Riyadh (30.2%), Eastern Province (22.3%), and Makkah (21.8%). These 3 regions represented two-thirds of the country's population and have 65% of the hospital-based child protection centers.<sup>25,26</sup>

Some studies also found a link between maternal illiteracy and emotional and physical neglect, with chances of higher occurrence among an educated father and an illiterate mother.

Al- Mahroos<sup>18</sup> (2007) found that the highest fatality rates in child abuse cases occurred among poor people pointing to a possible link between low income and child abuse. Poverty, lower level of parental education, large families, young parental age and low family income have been suggested as plausible risks or

eliciting factors for child abuse.<sup>29</sup> In the Arab world parents and educators tend to support the use of corporal punishment for discipline and education, they can also be related to the increased social stressors and violence noticed recently in the community.<sup>30</sup> Beliefs, religion and attitudes towards child upbringing among other things vary between different societies. In some communities, striking, slapping or shouting at children is a societal norm, so such practices usually occur, irrespective of parental education, age, or social status.<sup>31</sup> Several studies reported that parental divorce increased odds of all types of child abuse when compared to intact families.<sup>32</sup> Living away from the family is considered as a risk factor in child abuse which might be due to lacking of parental care, supervision, protection and love. Furthermore, it exposes the child to persons who may try to take advantage of him/her which might explain increased sexual abuse in children living with other persons outside family.<sup>33</sup> Several studies reported that strangers were the most common perpetrators of sexual abuse followed by uncles, older brothers, fathers and teachers. A national committee on prevention and management of child abuse and neglect should be urgently established to assume an active leadership role in attacking the problem, to provide a mechanism for increasing knowledge about the causes of this problem, and to identify steps that can be taken to prevent and treat abuse.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 1: Review of published papers about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Saudi Arabia**

Study title	No. of cases	Physical abuse	Sexual	Psychological	Neglect	Munchensen Syndrome
Al-Eissa 1991	7	4	0	0	2	1
Al-Jumaah 1993	1	0	0	0	0	1
Kattan H 1994	10	3	1	0	2	4
Al-Ayed I 1998	13	4	3	0	4	2
El Kardany 1999	2	2	0	0	0	0
Roy D 1999	1	1	0	0	0	0
G Karthikeyan 2000	3	2	1	0	0	0
Al Mahroos 2007	40	24	6	0	6	4
Al Eissa 2010	133	65	20	5	43	0
Osama 2012	87	-	74	-	-	0
W Elgausy 2013	54	0	0	54	0	0
Al Eissa 2015	2043	1175	287	1533	1021	0

**Table 2: Summary of National Family Safety Register (NFSR) cases**

NFSR	No. of cases	Physical abuse	Sexual	psychological	neglect	Munchensen syndrome
NFSR 2010	378	205	47	0	126	-
NFSR 2011		373	136	76	286	11
NFSR 2012	263	89	56	14	99	2
NFSR 2013	212	72	28	12	98	2
NFSR 2015	509	170	52	20	266	1

## Recommendation

More research is required to study the extent of problem in different settings of Saudi Arabia. The researcher thus recommends action in the following areas<sup>34</sup>:

1. Setting up awareness programs for underprivileged, vulnerable families under the supervision of specialists, to educate families on appropriate methods of raising children.
2. Medical Professionals to take a stand against Child Abuse and specially mandated to report cases of child sexual abuse
3. Introducing into school curricula advice for children on how to get help in the event of they are abused by anyone, inside or outside the family.
4. Consistent implementation & strict enforcement of law. Adequate Legislative framework and their consistent implementation & enforcement are very important.
5. Appealing to imams to help the community understand the position of Islam on violence and the need for moderation when disciplining children.

**Conflict of Interest:** None

**Source of Support:** None

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