

REVIEW

## Strengthening the “multidisciplinary child protection committees” in the community

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Child abuse and neglect have been widespread since time immemorial. It is not only detrimental to the affected child, but families, societies and cultures as well.

Although the exact prevalence of child abuse is not known in Sri Lanka, reported literature shows that it is a significant problem and the available statistical data on the prevalence of child abuse, is only the tip of the iceberg.

**Case Reports:** Three case reports are elaborated and its forensic clinical examination findings are discussed along with the medico-legal value of each case. These highlight the importance of empowerment with proper statutory amendments, educating the judiciary about practical background of these abuses by clinical forensic practitioners with sufficient practical experience and strengthening of the “Multidisciplinary child protection committees” for early detection of child abuse within the community.

**Discussion:** We suggest making the best use of the existing ‘praja’ committees, as first responders to recognize ‘high risk’ children within their community and reporting to a central authority such as National Child Protection Authority NCPA. Incorporating details of ‘high risk’ children into an electronic database would enhance easy reference, and electronic data linked to the ‘1929’ child-line would ensure a better outcome. Confidentiality should be maintained at all times. ‘High risk’ children and their families should be visited by the Child Rights Protection Officers on a regular basis and immediate action should be taken if any form of abuse is suspected. Representatives from schools attended to by ‘high risk’ children and the ‘Gramaseva Niladhari’ should be part of these committees. It is also necessary to register all families who have a single parent, with parents working abroad, involved in civil or criminal court cases, with psychiatric illness/addictions with the Grama Niladhari, police and local probation and childcare office.

**Conclusion:** “Multidisciplinary Child Protection Committees” should be strengthened in the community under the supervision of the NCPA using existing facilities and with the participation of multi-sectorial stake holders. This will help in early detection of child abuse and community monitoring of high-risk children.

**Keywords:** ‘high risk’ children, Multidisciplinary Child Protection Committees, first responders

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## INTRODUCTION

Child abuse and neglect have been widespread since time immemorial. It is not only detrimental to the affected child, but families, societies and culture as well. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), child abuse includes all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and negligent treatment and exploitation done by parent, guardians or any other strangers<sup>1</sup>.

The most tormenting issue is the occurrence of abuse within the families. Studies have revealed that poverty, overcrowded households, poorly educated parents, young parents, unrealistic expectations from child, parental substance abuse, history of parents being abused as children and mental and physical disabilities of child are the major risk factors for child maltreatment<sup>2,3</sup>.

Ill-health caused by child abuse, contributes significantly to the global health burden and the victims are more prone to psychiatric disorders and suicidal behaviour<sup>4</sup>.

Although the exact prevalence of child abuse is not known in Sri Lanka, reported literature shows that it is a significant problem<sup>5</sup>. A study conducted in Sri Lanka revealed that a considerable proportion of both male (22.4%) and female (15.7%) school children have been victims of physical abuse<sup>6</sup>. Most of the perpetrators are known to the victim and a significant number of them had experienced some form of physical or sexual maltreatment during their childhood<sup>7</sup>. A study conducted among adults showed that 44% have experienced some form of sexual abuse and 36% have been physically maltreated during childhood<sup>5</sup>. However, these statistics are only tip of the iceberg<sup>8</sup>.

The objective of this paper is to highlight the importance of strengthening the “Multidisciplinary Child Protection Committees” in the community for recognition and monitoring of high-risk children using case reports.

## CASE REPORTS

### Scenario 1: A child with developmental delay following physical abuse

A 3-year-old child was admitted to a Teaching Hospital, by the father and maternal grandmother, stating that she was physically abused by her step-uncle. History suggests that the mother of this baby had disputes with the baby’s father and had made

multiple complaints against him at the police, restricting him from coming home or seeing the baby. She had left the baby with her elder sister’s family and had gone abroad. The elder sister who had a 7-year-old daughter, had separated from her husband, was living with another man. This man is said to have sexually abused the older child and physically abused the 3-year-old.

Significant developmental delay was observed in physical growth and cognitive functions during examination of this child. Multiple abrasions, tram-line contusions, various patterned injuries and extensive burn injuries to the pubic area were noted confirming child physical abuse. Vaginal examination was unremarkable.

This case highlights the necessity of early detection of risk factors and vulnerability of a child by community monitoring when the affected children present to the legal system with family disputes.

### Scenario 2: A case of chronic, repeated child sexual abuse

A 14-year-old girl was brought for clinical forensic examination by the police following a complaint from the neighbourhood to Gramaseva Niladhari that this girl wanders around with several boys, and that these boys visit her home. The girl’s parents were deaf and dumb, and her mother who is a housewife watches pornography in front of her children. Her elder sister had eloped with a man when she was 15 years of age, and was subjected to medico-legal examination in 2018. During the Institutional Case Conference held at ‘Lama Piyasa’ it was recommended that the elder child is safer under the probationary care and her sister and brother also need close supervision. Her aunt agreed to take care of children with a court order. However, change of custody of care had not been arranged by the police through a court order and the two children were handed over only with a verbal agreement. Later, the father had fought with the aunt’s family and had brought the two children back home. The girl revealed that she goes to an abandoned house with boys, smokes cannabis and engages in sexual intercourse while her 10-year-old brother stays on guard. Her mother had been aware of this practice.

Genital examination findings were compatible with chronic, repeated hymenal penetration, indicating child sexual abuse.

This case illustrates the need of a system to follow-up children with risk even after decisions have been

taken by a multi-disciplinary team, strengthening the knowledge of stakeholders on the proper implementation of agreed decisions and educating the police and the judiciary.

### Scenario 3: Importance of monitoring 'risk' environments

A 9-year-old girl was brought for clinical forensic examination following a complaint made by the schoolteacher on the history of physical abuse by the student's daycare teacher. Further interviewing revealed that her mother lives with several partners and is involved in drug trafficking. Five months ago she had abandoned her daughter at the daycare centre and had not come back for her. The teacher of the daycare centre had then started to 'take care of the child'. The child revealed that she was forced to do household chores and was subject to physical abuse, and that the husband of the teacher engaged in genital fingering and oral intercourse with her, while the teacher videoed such acts on her mobile phone.

The genital examination findings were not compatible with hymenal penetration, but the given history cannot be excluded.

There was a history of this daycare centre staff physically abusing children in their care and had been warned by the police and courts previously.

This case illustrates the need for a system of background check and repeated monitoring by the authorities when such places are reported.

## DISCUSSION

Sri Lankan lawmakers and law enforcing authorities have been working hard to fight for the protection of children. Sri Lanka has a system to deal with child protection matters which has significantly developed since 1996 with the appointment of the Presidential Task Force on child protection. The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) was established under Act No.50 of 1998 with recommendations of the task force<sup>9</sup>. Empowerment of Probation & Childcare Officers is the need of the hour.

In spite of a powerful legal system, Sri Lanka still struggles to combat crimes against children. Need for amendments and training of judiciary is essential. NCPA has received 146,375 complaints in the year 2018. One thousand two hundred and sixty seven children were not receiving essential education, 536 were complaints of neglect, 555

complaints of sexual harassment, 311 complaints of rape and 375 complaints of grave sexual abuse<sup>10</sup>.

Most cases of child abuse frequently go under-reported. Major causes for under reporting may be the inability of parents to identify abuse at the right time and the lack of emotional attachment between parents and child. In some cases, the injuries are interpreted mistakenly as accidental in origin, and they fail to seek medico-legal assessment.

Parents/guardians are reluctant to bring their abused children to seek justice due to the intimidations they have to face during the entire justice-seeking process, inconvenience caused at the police stations and Government hospitals, undue delays in the process of examination, investigations and legal proceedings that cause significant hindrance in their daily pursuits.

In the absence of coherent assistance, abused children will struggle with evolving into functioning and independent members of the society. This will perhaps have an adverse impact on the development and culture of the country.

Schools should be a target to create awareness about child abuse. Simple teaching techniques on 'good touch' 'bad touch' should be widely established. Healthcare professionals and social support officers should actively work towards removing the social taboo of sexual health education in schools. Sexual health education should begin at primary education level in little children in an appropriate and understandable manner.

Further strengthening of laws if necessary and the Government and relevant authorities working collaboratively with law enforcement and social support officers are vital to prevent abuse and provide support where relevant<sup>11</sup>.

Sri Lanka already has a well-integrated support system. However, this system usually detects a child after the abuse has taken place. Homes and institutions where mothers and children from families with domestic violence can live together have to be established to deal with cases of child abuse. We propose refinement of the existing system, to recognize the submerged part of the iceberg for the prevention of child abuse. There should be timely intervention to detect and prevent any form of child abuse. Continuity of care and follow-up is as equally important as early detection. If not, as illustrated by Scenarios 1 and 2, even after the detection of possible child abuse, the affected child or other

children in the family can still end up in a devastating situation.

There are established ‘Prajā committees’ in each Grama Niladhari division, which comprise a Chairperson – a respectable and credible personality of the community, the Grama Niladhari as the secretary and around twenty members. The Government Circular for community police states that every Grama Niladhari division should have one community police officer. But this is not implemented in most areas due to lack of police officers. Furthermore, as one community police officer is responsible for several ‘prajā’ committees, it may reduce the efficiency of such committees. Each police division comprises an OIC for a larger ‘prajā’ committee and group of 10 eminent members of the police division works in collaboration with this officer, and advises him on the needs and drawbacks of the community.

We propose making the best use of these existing committees, where these committees could be the first responders to look into any form of child abuse or to recognize high risk children within their community. They should be able to report to a Central authority such as NCPA and to maintain a list of children/families with risk factors for child abuse, as mentioned above. The system would work better, if information of ‘high risk’ children are incorporated into an electronic database, which would enhance easy reference. However, confidentiality needs to be ensured. Data should be perusable by the National Child Protection Authority and the Department of Probation and Child Care Services through an integrated system. It is preferable if this database is linked with the ‘1929’ child-line.

If these families move into another community data base should be updated and relevant “Grama Niladhari” should be informed.

High risk, vulnerable groups of children who are in the database should be brought to the attention of the child rights protection officers of the area by the NCPA. ‘High risk’ children and their families should be visited by the Child Rights Protection Officers on a regular basis and immediate action should be taken if any form of abuse is suspected. Schools attended by these ‘high risk’ children should also be notified, and careful monitoring of school performance and behavioural changes should be carried out by the school teachers. As illustrated in Scenario 3, if not for the school, the child may still be suffering tormenting abuse.

What is most important in the establishing and maintenance of the proposed system is to preserve the confidentiality of the children, in order to prevent victimization and unnecessary stigmatization within society. Therefore, we suggest the strengthening of “Multidisciplinary Child Protection Committees” in the community under the supervision of NCPA using existing facilities with the participation of multi-sectorial stake holders for early detection and community monitoring of high-risk children. Legal provisions need to be made for compulsory hospitalization of children suspected of abuse. Police stations must be provided with more facilities to keep children and mothers till the primary inquiry is complete. More funds have to be allocated for transport of officers to visit homes frequently. Furthermore, it is necessary to provide trained matrons to be kept with children at police stations and in hospitals.

#### ETHICAL ISSUES

None

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**YT:** Examination of clinical cases, writing of manuscript, Literature survey; **WNSP:** Concept-ualization, Editing and reviewing of manuscript, Supervision; **MT:** Examination of clinical cases, Literature survey.

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