

A CASE STUDY ON A WOMAN WHO WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED AS A CHILD

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Abstract: This paper discusses the lived life of a woman Mrs. Seetha (name changed) who was sexually abused as a child. In-depth unstructured interview was the tool of data collection used to understand the experiences of Mrs. Seetha. Mrs. Seetha was sexually abused by four men in different stages of her childhood. The sex abuse ranging from sexual touch to the extent of rape. The major after effects of CSA in her adult life is sexualized behavior, substance abuse and fear of sex. Mrs. Seetha has found very less support from society and family and has built her life to working for sex abuse in her adulthood giving credit to her own will power that has made her come this far. It is identified that Mrs. Seetha has experienced three of dynamics from the Traumagenic Dynamic Theory developed by Finkelhor and Browne (1988).

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, survivor, coping.

Introduction: Child sexual abuse occurs when a child is used for the sexual gratification of an older adolescent or adult. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse experience an array of overwhelming and intense feelings. These may include feelings of fear, guilt, and shame. Abusers have been known to tell children that it is the fault of the child that they are abused, shifting the blame away from the abuser, where it belongs, and placing it on the child. Along with this, abusers may threaten or bribe the child into not speaking up; convincing the child that he or she will never be believed.

The reaction of a survivor's friends and family to the disclosure of the abuse also has the potential to trigger immense feelings of guilt, shame and distrust, particularly if those individuals denied that the abuse was taking place, or chose to ignore it. Recovering from child abuse and trauma can be a winding path, once described as a "spiral - a repeated traversing of the issues, layer by layer, piece by piece, sorting and resorting, until the toxicity of the abusive experiences has been released." (Baringer 1992)

Background: Mrs. Seetha, is a 44 year old women living with her husband and an adolescent son in Hyderabad. She heads an education institution and is a part of a team working against Child Sexual Abuse in India. The "seem to be normal life" of Mrs Seetha has buried down memories of Childhood Sexual Abuse experiences which does not lay down buried, but pops out way too often. The case study of Mrs Seetha is studied throwing some light into the Finkelhor and Browne (1988) Traumagenic Dynamic theory to understand the impact of childhood sexual abuse in Mrs Seetha's adulthood.

Childhood: Seetha is the eldest daughter to a business man father and a home-maker mother. She has a sister who is 4 years younger to her. Seetha looks back at her childhood with utmost admiration at her mother for her patience in putting up with her father who is an alcoholic. She has great respect for her mother, but questions her father's love towards

her. She mentions, "I sometimes wonder if my father could have been one of the abusers... I don't know... maybe I've tried not to remember it". Seetha was a neglected child in an upper middle class family with the father busy with work, friends and alcohol, while mother tried to run the house protecting herself from the hands of her husband. She states that she was a skinny dark girl in her childhood who was not very good at studies nor made good friends at school. She compares herself with her younger sister who was smarter and prettier, but does not envy her, whereas tries to be a protective elder sister.

Sexual abuse

Her earliest memory of sex abuse at age three is described by Seetha with the sentence beginning, "I remember it so vividly though I am 44 now..." Her memory of the first abuse is very strong which has happened while she was around three years old, she even remembers the printed shorts she wore that day. Seetha's parents left her in the care of a neighbor who is a protective and a loving lady. She has a very fond memory of this neighbor's kindness towards her. The abuser is the neighbor's brother-in-law who is described as "body-builder" man who is huge and well built to a child who is 3 years of age. The perpetrator was exercising in one of the room, he invited the child into his room and made her sit on his back and continued exercising. Seetha pauses and thinks and does not remember what exactly happened after that but remembers the "wet... oily feeling" between her thighs and the pain that she felt back then. As she speaks, Seetha says she "feels the cold shivers as she recollects incidents of that day". All that she wanted to do was to leave the room which she couldn't but kept howling continuously. The neighbor who heard the howling banged the door and came for her rescue. The next thing she remembers was being taken to the water tank outside the house and was given a bath.

The second instance of sex abuse in her childhood was when she was in class II (about seven to eight

years of age), when her mother's brother fondled her underdeveloped / not developed breasts in the most painful way. As she tries to put her experience of sex abuse into words, her eyes close and her forehead shrink feeling the pain and hurt of a well built man's hands on her "flat chest". The man had turned down her cry to stop hurting her and continued doing until he dropped her off at her mother's place.

The third instance of sex abuse was perpetrated by an age man, who is a story teller for the kids in the community she lived. She remembers the poem he sang every night while he completed the story and also remembers the "awkward feeling" of her hand being led towards the man's genitals. This old man always kept Seetha next to her so it gets easy for him to make her feel his genitals which continued for few months.

The fourth instance was when Seetha was in class III (about eight to nine years of age). She was raped by her father's friend who got her father drunk and her mother (does not remember very clearly on how but assumes) intoxicated by adding something into her mother's juice and her younger sister was sleeping. This abuser is described again as a, "body-builder kind" who grabbed this little girl and felt her breast. Seetha uses the word "I felt excruciating pain while his hands where on me... I felt I was almost dead". She was howling and crying and her sister who was sleeping came to her rescue but both of them where helpless. Seetha does not remember anything more but just sleeping after having exhausted crying. The next day at school she had blood running down her legs while the teacher incharge gave her a piece of cotton to wipe assuming her legs were hurt and as they found that the bleeding did not stop they sent her home. She was hospitalized for 21 days and her bleeding continued for 21 days and this started off like her monthly period ever since that day.

Seetha has experienced sex abuse in her adolescents and adult hood which she says, "the sex abuse that started in my childhood continued all throughout my life", she also says repeatedly that "there is something in me that has attracted older and wrong men towards me". Studies have noted a relationship between the experience of CSA and an increased vulnerability for assaults in adulthood (Messman & Long, 1996; Polusny & Follette, 1995). She was intoxicated by one of her dad's associates in her first years in college who seduced and fondled her but she was able to run away from that situation. She was again molested during her fresh working days as a reporter for a radio station by her supervisor who was also a part-time actor. She shares an incident which happened a couple of years back while she was walking back home late after work, were she was dragged by a man on the bike who kept yelling "I love you" to Seetha and tore her dress. This incident that

happened a couple of years back, has shattered her which she mentions as "It broke me down completely... broke the confidence I had built all this while"

Repressed memory, reporting & response: The first instance of sex abuse was a repressed memory until she met the abuser in one of the pooja that was organized in her community where the abuser was the priest. The first sight of the man at the age of seventeen or eighteen, she recollects the memory of the abuse and immediately rushes to report about it to her mom who is puzzled at how she might remember an incident from her early childhood and how she could blame a priest. Child sexual abuse is so traumatic to the psychological self that they become consciously inaccessible for extended time periods because of repression or disassociation (S. Freud, 1915/1957; Williams, 1994) Her mother questions on why she did not report it while it happened. Seetha feels that her mother only questioned and did nothing about it while she expected her mother to confront the abuser.

The second instance of her mother's brother (mama) was reported to her mother after a few days from the happening of the incident, while her mother was trying to give Seetha oil massage before bath. Seetha had screamed of pain while her mother's hand rubbed her chest. She reports of her mother's brother pressing her chest painfully. Mother's reaction towards this reporting was only questions of when and how but did nothing about it.

The third occurrence was not reported as the act was not understood by the child. The awkwardness she felt made her discontinue the story time with her local community friends.

The fourth incident of rape was reported by the child to her parents the very next day when she was brought home from school. The child has explained the incident as "uncle put a stick inside her (showing between her thighs). She remembers her mother was puzzled and in tears while her dad was furious and rushed to the perpetrators house but the man was missing. The abuser committed suicide in two months after this incident of rape.

The other abuse in her early adulthood was reported to her father when she found this part-time actor on TV while her dad was watching TV. She reports to her father that this man was the one who molested her while her father brushes it aside saying he wanted to continue watching the program.

Realization of abuse: Every women who has experienced sex abuse in her childhood hits a point in life where she gets to realize that what had happened to her was "abuse" while she wouldn't have know what had actually happened to her. The mind is able to protect itself by repressing traumatic events from awareness (Brown, Schefflin, & Whitfield, 1999).

Listening to particular program, reading a relevant article, listening to a radio program or even a particular smell etc might trigger the memory of sex abuse. But the realization of what has happened to them is abuse happens a little later. In Seetha's case, she realized that this was sex abuse when she was volunteering with an NGO teaching kids in the red-light area where a lady spoke on personal safety and sex abuse. This made her realize that what has happened to her was sex abuse.

Effects of Child Sexual Abuse: Childhood sexual abuse can cause long-lasting and negative consequences for the survivor which is identified by Mrs. Seetha from the statement, "my childhood is scared".

Seetha felt insecure about her own body which made her to cover herself in loose clothing. She also states that "I couldn't get myself to stand in front of the mirror". Looking into her was the most difficult. She was sexually aware at a very early age. She remembers men handling her in a way where they rubbed against her body while she was six to eight years old. She could sense and feel that their intentions were not right.

She says "I still cannot sleep alone". Fear has travelled with her all throughout her childhood days till her adulthood. During her adolescent years, she got heavily into masturbation. She built relationship with younger boys and broke-up with them when they came to a point of asking her to marry. She says, "It is my birthright to play with the emotions of other men as my emotions were also played with". She could not get herself to like a man who is older to her. All her relationships include men who are younger to her and accidentally most of them from Islam, wherein her friends remarked she was suffering from "YMB (Young Muslim Boys Syndrome)". Her now husband is five years younger to her.

Sex is not considered as a pleasurable act for Seetha. She still breaks down into rashes and boils after intimacy with her husband. She wants to love her husband without the act of sex. She was addicted to drugs and alcohol for a period of two years and quit her addiction when she realized this was "dragging her deep down". She credits her own will power which led her to quit.

Seetha attempted suicide at the age of eleven, getting frustrated with life finding no reason to live. She consumed pesticides and her community mocked her for a long time for the suicide attempt which led her to lead an isolated life with no friends.

She feels very different from other women of her age. She considers herself as dirty, used and unholy and impure.

Discussion: Seetha's life portrays a neglected and unprotected childhood. From the Traumagenic

Dynamic Theory, the three dynamic that is identified in Seetha's life are

- **Traumatic Sexualization** - the child's sexuality is altered and shaped by the event of sexual abuse. Processes affecting this include: focus on certain body parts where she avoids wearing clothes that expose her body or clings on to her and fear of sex which is evident while she breaks down into rashes and boils after every act of sex.
- **Betrayal** - betrayal is felt by the child towards her father who she feels did nothing about providing or protecting her or standing for her. While the disclosure occurred, and Seetha was not taken seriously neither one of the perpetrator was held responsible, the feeling of betrayal increased. Betrayal has resulted in depression, anger, reduced trust, and increased vulnerability to future abuse.
- **Powerlessness** - the child is unable to exert her will and get what she wants (not to be abused) and feels the threat of harm with no ability to alter the situation. The personal space of the child is violated. She is invaded psychologically, emotionally, and physically, and is trapped and helpless. As force and violence is involved in Seetha's case, the sense of powerlessness has increased. This results in the child feeling she has no control over her life. Effects include: somatic complaints like breaking out into rashes after sex, depression, and also becoming an aggressor taking control of the younger guys that she feel in relationship with and breaking the bond with them perpetrator of physical or sexual

Coping : Seetha's major coping strategy was to get herself drowned into books. She has built a strong will power to carry out what her mind and heart wished to do. Her thoughts about her mother in the hands of her father made her dream big and be of a rescue to her mom and sister. This drove her towards her goal and helped her focus on future and move on. She put herself into working for Child Sexual Abuse and is a part of a volunteering in schools to train the kids, teachers and parents of personal safety focusing on prevention of sex abuse.

This has helped the now 44 years old Principal of a school to move on with her life.

Conclusion : This case study has discussed the life of a women who was sexually abused at a very early age and was re-victimized in her adolescent years and even in adulthood. Some of the impacts of sex abuse in Mrs Seetha's life is higher sexual awareness, traumatized at the act of sex and addicted to drugs. These impacts of sex abuse in Mrs. Seetha's life is observed in three dynamics from Finkelhor's Traumagenic Dyanmic theory. She has moved through and worked through the impacts by her own will power to excel and achieve.

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