

# INTRAFAMILIAL SEXUAL ABUSE IN BANGLADESH

A RESEARCH  
ROADMAP FOR THE  
WAY FORWARD

Share-Net  
Bangladesh

The Knowledge Platform on  
Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights





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# List of Abbreviations

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BSAF	Bangladesh Shishu Odhikar Forum
CRC	Conventions on the Rights of Children
CSA	Child Sexual Abuse
ISA	Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse
KII	Key informant interview
NPA	National Plan of Action
SGD	Small Group Discussions
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund
WHO	World Health Organization





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# Executive Summary

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Intrafamilial sexual abuse is one of the most pervasive, yet under-reported, form of sexual abuse in Bangladesh. However, little academic and programmatic prove has been made into this grave issue, which has resulted in jeopardizing the psychosocial wellbeing for millions of children and adolescents across the broad socio-economic spectrum. Therefore, very little is known about the drivers of child sexual abuse, especially those happening within family environment. Recent statistics shows harrowing picture of child sexual abuse in Bangladesh, where every day, more and more children in Bangladesh, both male and female, are facing sexual abuse both in the household and outside.

ISA is a chronic type of problem, rather than acute, which occurs in conjunction with other forms of harm, and almost always involves emotional abuse. It can have long-term impact on the emotional, social and educational development of the survivor, and can significantly contribute to the development of mental health issues in their later life. ISA also affect the peer and surrounding of the survivors in many ways. Despite the menacing threat child sexual abuse poses to the millions of children and adolescents in Bangladesh, the laws for protecting children are not yet fully implemented or standardized. There is also not enough human resources and funding for institutions that have key roles in child protection (UNICEF, 2021). Conservative social norms, attitudes and practices still prevail over the society in Bangladesh wherein the status of the children is vulnerable, and prone to critical rights violations, which is exacerbated by a general lack of awareness among parents and caregivers on ISA, and related laws and services. On the one hand, sexual abuse cases are quite underreported. Even when incidents are reported, it is usually difficult to assess these cases due to normative social barriers. On the other, justice is inhibited by stigma and fear of risks. On top of all, there is a huge data gap pertaining to ISA committed against children in Bangladesh. In

most of the existing data and evidence on ISA in Bangladesh, the level of disaggregation is low and insufficient. However, available information points to a spike in sexual violation of children within the family environment.

This study explores the prevalence of and factors associated with the incidence of intrafamilial sexual abuse that has happened to children and adolescents in Bangladesh based on perceptions of a broad range of actors, including adolescent and youth, counselors, educators, law-enforcers, parents, activists and civil society representatives. The study adopted a qualitative approach in the collection and analysis of data. Key informant interviews served as the primary means of data collection. Documents and cases pertaining to intrafamilial sexual abuse were also reviewed. Data were analyzed using thematic and document analysis. The study revealed that intrafamilial child sexual abuse in Bangladesh is associated with a set of very subtle structural factors, which put children at risk of abuse, prevent children, families, and communities from reporting, while limiting the accessibility of laws, policies and services in regard for survivors and their families. There are 'conflicts' between normative/legal and traditional socio-cultural value systems in Bangladesh in that there is no comprehensive understanding of the underlying fundamental issues driving this phenomenon. In order to make Bangladesh a safe and secured society for children, policy and programmatic responses firstly need to recognize this grave concern, and devise elaborate actions to resolve these issues. As a basic first step, a comprehensive national prevalence study on the prevalence, dynamics and the underlying factors associated with ISA is needed. Further in-depth research of the socio-cultural determinants of intrafamilial sexual abuse is also deemed absolutely necessary in the study, followed by inclusive and effective policy and programmatic measures to fight off ISA.



# 1. Introduction

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Women and children are exposed to many forms of sexual violence and abuse across the world. Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse (ISA) is one of the most pervasive, yet under-reported, form of sexual abuse that takes place within the family environment. Not only this is one of the most prevalent form of sexual violence, ISA is also among the most traumatic experiences that women and children are susceptible to. Usually, children and adolescents are the primary targets of this abuse.

The term ‘sexual violence against children’ or ‘child sexual abuse and exploitation’ includes diverse acts of abuse, in different settings and relationships. Specifically, according to Article 18 of Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) (2007a) (a), it refers to (a) engaging in sexual activities with a child who, according to the relevant provisions of national law, has not reached the legal age for sexual activities (this does not apply to consensual sexual activities between minors), and (b) engaging in sexual activities with a child where use is made of coercion, force or threats; or abuse is made of a recognized position of trust, authority or influence over the child, including within the family; or abuse is made of a particularly vulnerable situation of the child, notably because of a mental or physical disability or a situation of dependence. This is to be noted that the survivors of ISA may or may not be aware that this is abusive behavior, and the act of the sexual other abuse may or may not be accompanied by violence.

There is an omnipresent misconception about ISA against children in that the widespread perception sees ISA as a rare event perpetrated only against girls by only male strangers in mostly poor, rural households. On the contrary, ISA against

children is a much too common phenomenon across all spectrum of the society which results in jeopardizing the life, health and wellbeing of millions of children, boys and girls alike, in large and small communities, urban and periphery, and across all socioeconomic backgrounds and settings. These acts are perpetrated by many types of offenders, who can be men and women, strangers, trusted friends or family, and people of all sexual orientations, socioeconomic classes, and cultural backgrounds.

A review of 217 studies, found 1 in 8 of the world's children (12.7%) had been sexually abused before reaching the age of 18 (Stoltenborgh et al, 2011). At the same time, the scale, complexity and danger of online facilitated child sexual abuse and exploitation is escalating (WeProtect, 2018), with technology enabling new modes of child abuse to emerge. However, there is a sheer lack of robust data on the prevalence rates for sexual abuse and exploitation, more so for ISA against children.

Recent statistics shows harrowing picture of child sexual abuse in Bangladesh, where every day, more and more children in Bangladesh, both male and female, are facing sexual abuse both in the household and outside. At least 986 child rape incidents were reported in 2020, more than twice the numbers recorded in 2018 (444) and 2017 (470). The number was much lower in 2016 (280) (The Dhaka Tribune, 2020). Most of the time, the abusers are found to be somehow related to the children. Women are also increasingly falling prey to ISA.

Traumatic experiences of ISA and exploitation have long-lasting, in cases, life-long impact on the survivors, and can cause intense feelings of shock, rage, confusion, denial, chronic trauma, disbelief, and even guilt and shame. Survivors often tend to blame themselves for such abuses. They hardly disclose to anybody else about it. In fact, very often, the survivors completely block out any memory of the violence,

and are conditioned not to question ISA. In cultures like the prevailing one in Bangladesh, that place a high value on female virginity, a girl who has been sexually abused may feel that she has been disgraced and is now “damaged goods” whom no one would want to marry. This can lead to further secrecy and increase risk of abuse, particularly for children and adolescents. This, combined with a range of other socio-economic factors, lead to the perpetuation of the ISA phenomena, while substantially limiting the number of reported cases.

## **1.1 Significance of the study**

Despite the menacing threat child sexual abuse poses to the millions of children and adolescents in Bangladesh, the laws for protecting children are not yet fully implemented or standardized. There is also not enough human resources and funding for institutions that have key roles in child protection (UNICEF, 2021). Conservative social norms, attitudes and practices still prevail over the society in Bangladesh wherein the status of the children is vulnerable, and prone to critical rights violations, which is exacerbated by a general lack of awareness among parents and caregivers on ISA, and related laws and services. On the one hand, sexual abuse cases are quite underreported. Even when incidents are reported, it is usually difficult to assess these cases due to normative social barriers. On the other, justice is inhibited by stigma and fear of risks. On top of all, there is a huge data gap pertaining to ISA committed against children in Bangladesh. In most of the existing data and evidence on ISA in Bangladesh, the level of disaggregation is low and insufficient. However, available information points to a spike in sexual violation of children within the family environment.

ISA against children is a rather diverse and complicated issue, and no single factor can explain why this occurs (Ligiero et al, 2019). Violence against children in the homestead does not

happen in an isolated bubble unaffected by the wider social context. Influenced by the societal norms and values, ISA disproportionality affect groups in a community or population who are disadvantaged as a result of interacting structural inequalities such as poverty, gender inequity, racism, sexual orientation together with institutional and organization practices that do little to challenge or even reinforce the same. ISA is a result of various factors underpinned by patriarchy coupled with stigmas and lack of knowledge and awareness. There is also a widespread notion of validation of sexual activities by masculine gender roles, and ‘culture of impunity’ when it comes to ISA. However, little is known about what drives it and what practitioners know about it.

ISA against children remains to be underexplored along with the set of very subtle structural factors, which put children at risk of abuse, prevent children, families, and communities from reporting, while limiting the accessibility of laws, policies and services in regard for survivors and their families. There are ‘conflicts’ between normative/legal and traditional socio-cultural value systems in Bangladesh in that there is no comprehensive understanding of the underlying fundamental issues driving this phenomenon. In order to make Bangladesh a safe and secured society for children, policy and programmatic responses firstly need to recognize this grave concern, and devise elaborate actions to resolve these issues. As a basic first step, a comprehensive national prevalence study on the prevalence, dynamics and the underlying factors associated with ISA is needed. Further in-depth research of the socio-cultural determinants of intrafamilial sexual abuse is also deemed absolutely necessary in the study, followed by inclusive and effective policy and programmatic measures to fight off ISA. However, due to the high level sensitivity, ethical concern (that involves confidentiality, privacy, mental, physical, social health of the victim) of the issue, collecting data and information is challenging, which acts as a barrier to research with depth and width on ISA. Under this pretext, this study has been undertaken with a view to dig deeper into the issue,



and chalk out the extent, emerging trends of ISA in Bangladesh as well as to examine the needs and scopes for further exploration and research into this issue.

## 1.2 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are

- To understand the extent and prevalent nature of ISA across different socio-economic groups in Bangladesh;
- To explore the nature and variant of ISA;
- To identify the evidence gaps through a scientific research method;
- To propose appropriate/probable/possible methodologies how to capture large-scale evidence on ISA;
- To improve the understanding and knowledge in addressing the abuse;
- To provide a set of recommendations on the scopes for further in-depth research on ISA in Bangladesh;

## 1.3 Methodology

This study followed a qualitative approach in collecting and analyzing the data. Due to the limited scalability and scope of the project as well as challenges imposed by COVID19, the principal method of data collection was Key Informant Interview (KIIs) and review of relevant documents and literature. Moreover, Small Group Discussions (SGD) was also conducted with a group of adolescent boys and girls. Several case stories were also collected and analyzed from both first-hand and secondary sources. The overarching goals of the KIIs and SDG extract the following information from the respondents:

Information sought	Respondent categories
Exploring the causes identified by study participants for intrafamilial sexual violence	NGO workers, Sociologists, counsellors, police/law enforcers, school teachers, parents, adolescent boys and girls,
Gender and socioeconomic variations	Sociologist, NGO worker, Police/law enforcers, counselor, adolescent boys and girls.
Consequences stemmed from intrafamilial sexual abuse;	NGO workers, Sociologists, counsellors, police/law enforcers, school teachers, parents, doctor, psychotherapist, Adolescent boys and girls.
Structural issues, such as laws or systems	Law enforcers, sociologist
Seek clarification about procedures, guidelines, protocols and trainings on the issues by different stakeholders	Law enforcer, NGO worker, sociologist
Public perceptions, victim needs, and recommendations for change	NGO workers, Sociologists, counsellors, police/law enforcers, school teachers, parents, doctor, psychotherapist, Adolescent boys and girls.
Respondents' demographics (including family life and relationships; schooling and employment; housing, income, health and disability	NGO workers, Sociologists, counsellors, police/law enforcers, school teachers, parents, doctor, psychotherapist, Adolescent boys and girls.
Parenting styles, children security at home;	Parents, school teacher

Information sought	Respondent categories
Victimization experiences (conventional crime, child maltreatment, peer violence, sexual abuse, physical punishment, witnessing family and community violence)	NGO workers, Sociologists, counsellors, police/law enforcers, school teachers, parents, doctor, psychotherapist, Adolescent boys and girls.
Social support and help-seeking	School teacher, parents
Mental health, emotional well-being, self-esteem, lifetime adversity	Counselor, sociologist, psychotherapist, school teacher, parents.

The detail of the methodology is as follows:

### 1.3.1 Document review:

The document review process assisted the researcher to understand the extent of intrafamilial sexual abuse happening in the country as well as the nature and variant of intrafamilial sexual abuse. The researcher then cross-checked the finding from the document review with the findings from primary data. For the documents, reports from relevant government and non-government bodies, journal articles, books, reports of international organizations were discussed and analyzed thematically. The key words that have been used to search relevant documents can be divided in two groups. Group A includes, sexual abuse, childhood sexual abuse, intrafamilial sexual abuse, impact of child sexual abuse, causes of child sexual abuse, , stigma, victimization. Group B includes trends and patterns of child sexual abuse, policies/activities to stop child sexual abuse, recommendation, research challenge.

### 1.3.2 Key Informant Interview (KII):

Considering the COVID 19 safety measures, most of the KIIs was held virtually and the duration of each KII was from

40 minutes to 1 hour. The purpose of KII was to collect information on the perspective, opinion and knowledge of the people from different relevant sectors.

### 1.3.3 Small Group Discussion:

Two small group discussions, comprising of 3 participants in each, one with boy young adults/high school children and one with girls young adults/high school children, were conducted in Dhaka. In the discussion, their views on the prevalence, nature and underlying reasons were sought for along with pathways to prevent ISA. The sampling process of selecting participants for SGD was chain referencing system (popularly known as 'snowball' sampling).

### 1.3.4 Case Stories:

This study collected three case stories, one with an adolescent girl and one with an adolescent boy, who has experienced any kind of ISA. Due to ethical consideration and confidentiality, the children / adolescent were approached for case study with the assistance of key informants. However, following the ethical principle of the research, the researcher kept the utmost confidentiality in case studies. The sensitivity of the issue was respected, the children's mental states has also been observed and considered during data collection.

Following is the information how respondents for case stories were found and approached:

**Case Story 1 and 3:** Collected from a secondary source (Key informant) who possessed a comprehensive account of the case described.

**Case Story 2:** One of the adolescent boys in SD voluntarily wanted to share his experience and his story was listened and noted by the researcher after the SDG ended.

Methods of data collection	Key informant	Sampling
Key Informant interview	Representatives from NGOs	Purposive
	Academics	
	Police/law enforcers	
	Child/adolescent Counsellor	
	Parent/caregivers (parents of children of middle class family)	
	Parent/caregivers (parents of under privileged children)	
	School teachers	
	Government official from the relevant ministries	
	Medical personnel	
	Psychotherapist for children with special needs	
Small group Discussion	Adolescent boys (number of participants 3)	Snowball
	Adolescent girls (number of participants 4)	
Case Stories		collected through KIs

*Table 1: Methods of Data Collection*

# 2. Literature review

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## 2.1 Methodological issues in the studies of ISA

Measurement of the prevalence of ISA is rather complex and contested in that it is marred with several methodological issues. Starting with the definitions of ISA, which typically vary across studies, such as in terms of the age used to define childhood as well as the types of acts considered as sexual abuse. Prevalence estimates are influenced by the decisions of sample selection, survey methods, and number and detail of screening questions, among others (Goldman, 2000).

Further to the definition issue, studies on ISA have used different definitions of what, at minimum, constitutes childhood sexual abuse (Peters, Wyatt, and Finkelhor, 1986). “For example, some may define sexual abuse as any unwanted sexual experiences before the of age 14, or attempted or completed rape by age 17, or any attempted or completed sexual contact that occurred between relatives before the victim turned 18. While others may restrict this category to actual sexual contact between someone under 15 years of age and another person 5 or more years older;” Peters, Wyatt, and Finkelhor (1986) exemplifies. It is apparent that such variability have clear bearings on the estimates of sexual abuse incidence or prevalence in any given sample. The effects of different abuse definitions on the identification of abuse-related psychological disturbance, are, however, less looked into. It is not unreasonable to assume, for example, that researchers who restrict themselves to earlier or more intrusive forms of abuse might report more extreme outcomes than those using broader definitions (Peters, 1988). Without a standard definition of what does and does not constitute ISA, findings

regarding ISA correlates can only be evaluated in terms of the specific definition being used in the study.

A vast majority of the research on ISA in Bangladesh and around the world, particularly those estimating prevalence, rely on adult retrospective reporting, meaning that it may be subject to recall bias, while objective informant observations are likely to underreport because of the large proportion of ISA incidents that goes unseen. Besides, cases reported to legal authorities in most cases reflect cases of physically violent injuries requiring treatment, as these cases are difficult to hide. At the same time, it also likens the magnitude of ISA or sexual violence to an iceberg, in which only the smallest portion is reported to authorities, a larger yet still incomplete portion is reported on surveys, and an unquantifiable amount remains unreported because of stigma, fear, or other factors (Krug EG, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, et al., 2002). A range of studies also found inverse associations between disclosure and the severity of abuse, with children more likely to disclose noncontact abuse than contact abuse (Paine ML, 2002).

Moreover, in most cross-sectional studies, respondents of ISA research are often simultaneously questioned about abusive events that has, in most cases, occurred years ago. The same time, their current level psychological functioning is taken in account in the analysis, wherein incidents of ISA are usually designated as independent variables, and subjects' responses on psychological measures are considered dependent variables. The correlational and retrospective character of such designs may also influence the outcomes, wherein the underlying cause and effect of the phenomenon can become blurred. (Briere, 1992)

As indicated above, retrospective research on sexual abuse effects relies almost entirely on subjects' recalling of past events. This creates a new dilemma as recollection of abuse in childhood may be affected by "the influence of contemporary

adaptation on recall” (Cicchetti, et al., 1981). For example, “the adult who, by virtue of her need to avoid painful abuse memories, is amnesic for much or all of her childhood victimization may truthfully report no knowledge of having been abused (Briere et al., 1987).” The passage of time may also mitigate against accurate or complete recall of childhood traumas (Menard, 1991). “Although one might assume that the victimization experiences reported by subjects antedate their current psychological functioning, the reverse is possible as well: current distress or symptomatology may impact on respondents’ retrospective reports of abuse (Briere, 1992).”

## 2.2 An overview of studies on child sexual abuse in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, CSA has been addressed through policy and programmatic measures since the early 1990s. Theory and interventions on the phenomenon have mainly focused on the trends, patterns and short and long term impacts. There is a dearth of in-depth comprehensive research evidence in Bangladesh on child sexual abuse. However, available information suggests that the problem is widespread, and that those particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse include the underprivileged and marginalized, religious and ethnic minorities or caste groups, those with disabilities, those in institutional care, working children, migrant children and bonded child laborers (Slugget, Cath, 2003).

Several studies have been undertaken to document the prevalence of CSA in countries around the world, and in Bangladesh too. A recent report highlighted that South Asia is the third highest region for violence against children after Western and Central Africa and Eastern and Southern Africa (Know Violence in Childhood, 2017). The South Asian countries including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka,



Maldives and Afghanistan share commonalities in different demographic, socio-economic and human development indicators. Approximately 45 percent of the girls in this region are married before the age of 18 years, almost 17 million children are involved in child labor and 32 million children remain out-of-school making this region having the highest rates of child marriage and child labor, and the second highest for the number of out-of-school children after the sub-Saharan region (Khan & Lyon, 2015; UNICEF South Asia, 2018). All of these factors make the children of this region subjected to a growing problem of violence and abuse. In consideration of these facts, it can be presumed that Bangladesh also has a high rate of CSA (Rahman, 2017). However, in Bangladesh there is a sheer lack of data. Most of the information is revealed either by newspaper reports or by governmental and NGO reports. These reports also indicate CSA as a major public health and social problem in Bangladesh.

In 2020 alone, from January to June, at least 1,387 children in Bangladesh have been subjected to various forms of violence and abuse, according to a report released by Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), which has published their findings based on newspaper reports of 15 national dailies of the country. However, the organization could not gather data from March 15 to April 15 owing to the lockdown. This means that the numbers would have been much higher with reported data from another month taken into account. In the same report, BSAF documented 552 unnatural child deaths, 122 murders, 365 cases of sexual abuse, 112 children kidnapped or missing, 94 survivors of violence, 97 cases of accidents, and 45 survivors of early child marriage. (The Dhaka Tribune, 2020)

Slugget (2003) in a regional report on CSA in South and Central Asia noted that very little scientific work has been done on child sexual abuse in the region, including in Bangladesh. She pointed out some areas that clearly need to be researched including culture-based definitions of 'child' and 'sexual abuse', and perceptions of sexual maturation. According to her,

clarity on these is fundamental for assessing service use and provision for several reasons: 1) children are often viewed as compliant to abuse; 2) sexual abuse is often viewed as only rape and sodomy; 3) man to boy sexuality is widespread and, in some areas, legitimated; and 4) though it is clear that sexual abuse socially impacts girls and boys differently, perceptions also prevail that boys are less psychologically impacted than girls (Slugget, Cath, 2003). These assumptions are common and directly affect the prevalence and recurrence of CSA both inside and outside the home environment.

## 2.3 Legal framework on the protection of children from abuse

The constitution of Bangladesh in its Article 27, 28 and 31 recognizes the fundamental right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law. It further guarantees that ‘the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth and right to protection of law’ respectively, laying down the general principles regarding the protection of children and others from all forms of discrimination. The constitution also provides that the ‘state shall not be prevented from making special provision in favor of children’. However, the Bangladeshi legal system lacks a unique definitions of ISA and CSA like the one defined by WHO, but in different acts like “Penal Code, 1860”, “Children Act, 2013”, “Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010”, and “The Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act, 2000”, there is a taxonomy of almost every abusive event against children as described in the WHO definition.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As stated in the response to the questionnaire by Bangladesh Government for the United Nations Study on Violence against children. Available at: <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/CRC/docs/study/responses/Bangladesh.pdf>

Bangladesh was also among the first country to ratify the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (CRC) in 1990. As a signatory to the CRC and its protocol, the Government has undertaken various measures towards the implementation of the CRC. In a bid to address the enormity of the problem, Bangladesh was also the first country in South Asia to sign the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. The country has hosted the South Asia Consultation for the Second World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in November 2001 where a South Asia Strategy was developed, proposing 20 concrete measures for preventing commercial sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and for the rescue, recovery and reintegration of affected children. The strategy was later translated into a National Plan



List 1: Key laws related to child sexual abuse in Bangladesh

of Action (NPA) with the aim of eliminating child prostitution, trafficking of girls and boys for sexual purposes, sex tourism, and child pornography. Some of the salient points of the NPA recognize the existence of child sexual abuse within the domain of the home, the necessity of psychosocial support structures, and the need to tackle entrenched cultural practices like child marriage. (Save the Children, 2003)

Nari 'O Shishu Nirjaton Doman Act, 2000 (The suppression of violence against Women and children Act) is one of the major initiatives of the government targeted to protect the children from violence. This law made the provision of severe penalties for trafficking, rape, abduction and sexual abuse. Moreover, it bars the news media from disclosing identities of survivors, identity. The same law also prohibits child pornography (Section 292, 293 and 294 of the penal code (ACT XLV) pertain to the sale, rent distribution exhibition and/or circulation of materials that are obscene). For offenders, the punishment imposed for selling, renting, distributing, exhibiting and obscenity to young person under 20 years of age is twice as harsh. Section 10 of Nari 'O Shishu Nirjaton Doman Act, 2000 state for sexual harassment of children a person shall be liable for imprisonment of 10 years. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, there is no separate legislation or guidelines to protect children from injurious information and material transmitted through the media, Internet, videos, electronic games, etc. Neither there is any particular policy or law dealing specially with ISA against children.

# 3. Findings and discussion

## 3.1 Prevalence, trends, and patterns of ISA in Bangladesh: An intersectional perspective

Child sexual abuse, especially those happening within the familial environment is found in all classes of society in Bangladesh, as in other countries. In 2019, Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF) found that a total 4,381 children experienced different forms of violence and exploitations of whom 1,383 children have been subjected to sexual violence. The Forum’s comparative scenario between 2018 and 2019 indicate that the incidents of sexual violence increased (by 70.32%) alarmingly in 2019. The incidents of child murders also increased from 418 in 2018 to 448 in 2019. BSAF also indicated that 365 children have been subjected to different forms of violence every month on an average during the year. Although a more comprehensive account of the types of the incidents (e.g, intrafamilial or extrafamilial) was unavailable, it can be safely presumed that a substantive portion of these incidents took place within home.

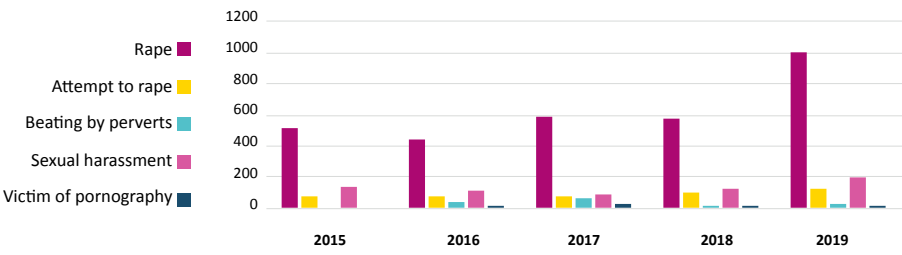


Chart 1: Trend of sexual violence against children in Bangladesh (2015-2019)

Source: BSAF, 2020

***“Most of the child sexual abuse cases reported with the law enforcement comprise of intrafamilial abuse. Because for the last three years, cases of domestic violence were substantially higher compared to other categories of sexual violence. Given that we are all well informed about the general lack of reporting when it comes to intrafamilial sexual abuse.” [KI, Police ]***

Consistent with the information provided by the KI, BSAF monitoring reveals that sexual violence against children increased by 76 per cent in 2019 in comparison to 2018, and the type of violence included rape, attempt to rape, beating by perverts, sexual harassment and victimization by pornography. The data, gathered based on media reports, (BSAF, 2019) shows that in 2019, total 1005 incidents of rape, 128 attempts to rape, 203 sexual harassments, and 28 incidents of beating by perverts and 19 incidents of victimizations by pornography took place. The data as illustrated in the report shows a trend of last five years which indicate an alarming trend of increase in incidents of rape, attempt to rape and sexual harassment in 2019 as compared to data of 2018 and previous years.

One of the KIs working at a One Stop Crisis Center (OCC), which provides medico-legal assistance for survivors of physical and sexual assaults, informed that the particular OCC she works at receives nearly a hundred cases per month. The rate, however, seen an unprecedented spike during the lockdown imposed to tackle COVID19. “The number of cases quickly rose by more than one third after the first few months of the lockdown. We have recorded the highest number of cases in 2020 during September-October,” she informed. This has deeper implication for the phenomenon of ISA and CSA in general, which has been discussed in the later section.

***“In OCCs, most of the cases we receive are survivors of sexual violence, especially rape and other form physical abuse. We also do receive survivors who faced abuse like unwanted physical touch and facing severe mental health issues owing to that, but the number is comparatively lower.” [KII, Counselor, OCC]***

Among the many forms and manifestations of sexual abuse, the recent rise in rape as one of the most predominant forms of ISA in Bangladesh is a grave concern. However, data gathered for the study also suggests that non-penetrative acts of ISA such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching are also common. Moreover, ISA also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or participating in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse, are also on the rise. Intrafamilial CSA can involve all kinds of contact and non-contact abuse, including online-facilitated CSA. Sexual abuse in cyberspaces is also getting prominence as an emerging child rights issue in Bangladesh, which is reflected in the increasing number of victimization by pornography in the recent years. [Chart 1]. However, there is still no research into how or with what frequency abusers use technology within the family in Bangladesh.

***“When I went on to my friends to share how I experienced sexual abuse by close family members, four out of my five friends came out and informed that they also have faced similar experiences in their family, and this is only us! Can you imagine of all of the survivors from my age come out what would the number be!” [SGD, Female adolescents]***

### 3.1.1 Who are the survivors?

In case of child sexual abuse, there is no age boundary to which perpetrators conform to and abstain themselves from abusing a child. In the above mentioned BSAF report, children as young as two were among the rape survivors in 2019. Available data on the incidents of CSA in 2019 collected by BSAF from the media and news sources indicates that children of 13-18 years of age group constitute the largest number of incidents of rape followed by the children belonging to 7-12 years which indicates increased level of vulnerability of growing children, which might have linkages with their mobility. Contrarily, though constitute the smallest number, children belonging to age group of 1-6 years are also victimized by rape as the data shows that 133 number of incidents of rape took place within this age group.

*“Among the survivors, who seek support, most are youth and adolescent girls, the number of which ranges from 85 to 100 in our OCC per month on an average. However, we receive male survivors of child sexual abuse too. But the number is much lower. We usually get one to two male victim a month, most of whom falls within the adolescent age group.” [KII, OCC]*

Remarkably, the BSAF monitoring also documents an increasing trend of rape of boy children. During the year former students detailed multiple allegations of sex abuse at the hands of teachers and older pupils in madrasah. According to AFP, in July at least five madrasah teachers were arrested on rape charges against boys and girls under their care. In one instance, senior students were held for the rape and beheading of an 11-year-old orphan. BSAF commented these crimes had not been reported previously due to the sensitivity of the subject but were “widespread and rampant.”



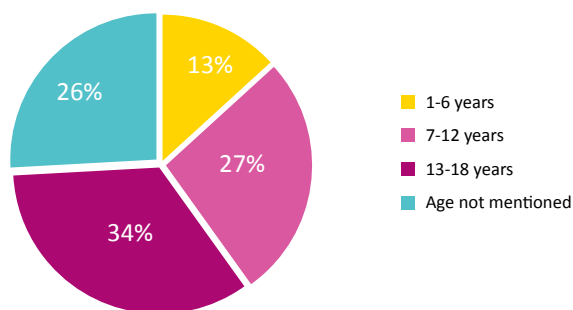


Chart 2: Age distribution of child rape survivors 2019

Source: BSAF, 2020

The quantitative data corresponds to the first-hand account of psychosocial therapist of OCC. KIs also informed that the 13-18 age range comprises most of the survivors. Most of the survivors of reported incidents are girls. The same goes for the majority of survivors seeking support in OCCs. Boys are also facing this menacing threat increasingly but not as frequent. Majority of the reported cases are taking place in predominantly lower and lower-middle class households. While the prevalence is still concerning among the upper-class families, it may be that a lot of the cases in this particular strata goes unreported. In terms of urban-rural variation, prevalence of ISA is seemingly higher in rural households than in urban, participants noted pointing to available data.

A joint study conducted by Save the Children and Bangladesh Protibondhi Foundation in 2010 revealed that children with special need are usually at a higher risk of getting sexually harassed as they are unable to protect themselves; and even at greater risk are those who are intellectually challenged since they are unable to make out the difference between good and bad touches and are often unable to articulate their concerns.

***“Child with special need is most vulnerable to the risk of sexual abuse, as they cannot express themselves, protect themselves. An extra special care is always needed for them, and unfortunately in can also happen that the caregiver becomes perpetrator. (KII, Psychotherapist for special need children)***

Besides, there are around one million children in Bangladesh, who live in the streets. These children are deprived of the care of the family and are more vulnerable to all forms of CM (BSS, 2019).

### **3.1.2 Who are the perpetrators?**

ISA is perpetrated or facilitated in or out of the home environment, the family network by perpetrators who could virtually be anyone around a child. It could be a family member, or someone otherwise linked to the family context or environment, whether or not they are a family member. A large number of perpetrators committing ISA in Bangladesh is close to the victim (e.g. father, uncle, stepfather). Data from the above mentioned 2010 study suggests that in half of the cases, more than 90% of the abusers were family members and close relatives. However, sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males in Bangladesh. Women also commit acts of sexual abuse, as do other children.

***“Most sexual abuse starts from home by intimate family members and acquaintances (sensitive relations). We have seen first cousins, brothers-in-law, parents and even siblings as perpetrators. Children living in extended families are more prone to be abused than the ones living in nuclear families due to the frequent mobility of people to the household, and also because apparently ISA is easier to hide in larger households.” [KII, NGO Representative]***

Sociologist and child protection practitioner, in KIIs, informed that in the context of Bangladesh, family members as well as close acquaintances of the family including the likes of family friends, both close and distant relatives, teachers, step-parents, who have frequent mobility to the household.

***“It does not have to be necessarily a family member, especially in the urban households where we are becoming increasingly dependent on people who provide household services like maids, drivers, gatekeepers etc. and this is opening up more room for the abuse of the children in the household, as perpetrators helming from these particular groups have open access to the home, and spend a significant amount of time around children.”***  
***KII, Sociologist***

Though there is a prevailing tendency of not collecting and preserving comprehensive data on the perpetrators of CSA across the service-providing landscape, media monitoring reports on child sexual abuse denotes the same, finding that local vagabonds and neighbors are the main perpetrators of rape incidents, where lovers, teachers, close relatives, transport workers, friends/class fellows friends are also included in the list. For non-penetrating incidents, the perpetrators are usually close family members or family acquaintances. Age segregated data of the perpetrators of rape incidents reveal that youths and adults (age group of 18-40 years) have mostly been alleged as the perpetrators of rape, where men of middle age group (41-50 years of age) and men above 50 years of age also have been alleged as the suspected perpetrators. Remarkably, 62 children below the 18 years also have also been alleged as suspected perpetrators in CSA cases in the 2019 BSAF report.

*“Every day more and more cases of Child sexual abuse are coming into light mainly through the media. The more I hear about these cases, the more anxiety I get for my children. There seems to be no boundary as to who can be the perpetrators. I feel ashamed to say this out loud but I now cannot believe in anyone around my children.” [Kil, Parent]*

## 3.2 Underlying causes of ISA

Intrafamilial child sexual abuse is rooted in the overall social dynamic, not simply related to sexual behavior. Child sexual abuse has been perpetuated in Bangladesh and around the world using the means of socio-cultural taboos and stigma. There are a host of factors that contribute to the occurrence of ISA in a culture, engraved in the idea of patriarchy and cultural heritage. Social values and norms fostering abuse and exploitation of children are often glossed over or protected citing the importance to carry forward traditional values for the sake of ‘cultural identity’. This section reflects on the underlying causes of child sexual abuse, particularly exploring the dimensions of factors giving rise to CSA within family environment.

### 3.2.1 Cultural factors

Cultural values in Bangladesh fosters strong family bonds, where parenting practices mainly follow traditional norms. Children are brought up within a family, where a mother is the primary caregiver, while the upbringing practices mainly focus on ensuring food and education (Hamadani & Tofail, 2014). The importance of nurturing for the psycho-social wellbeing of children is still a comparatively new discourse in Bangladeshi society. Even then, the general awareness in regards is till limited to the educated, comparatively well-off, urban families.

***“Intrafamilial sexual abuse, in my opinion, is inherently a cultural issue and we have been forwarding the very practices that cause this forward for generations. From our societal perception toward girls and children in general to the familial and societal practice of power and authority and our socialization in general, everything feeds into the problem.” [KII, Sociologist]***

Notwithstanding the vivid accounts of children testifying their experience of being sexually abused by community and family members alike, ISA against children in traditional Bangladeshi society is still in many parts denied, avoided and glossed over. The culture of denial and inaction is only contributing to the perpetuation of this practice which is entrenched in the patriarchal social structure. Moreover, due to the normative value system in the society, recognition of the widespread presence of ISA puts enormous pressure on the institutional structure of the family. The notions of privacy and loyalty within the family makes it all the more difficult to act upon and prevent ISA by outside forces, including for the law enforcement agencies.

“The stigma attached to CSA occurring particularly within the home accounts for a large part of the silence that encircles it. Families fear the stigma because it could result in problems when arranging marriages for other family members” (Slugget, Cath, 2003). Owing to this, interventions targeting the retribution of the perpetrator or even recovery of the abused, is barely seen as an option. The widespread social norms fails to see counselling as a method of helping, rather it is popularly perceived as an invasion of familial privacy. This in many parts caused by the existing family insularity, unfamiliarity with the concept, and fears of breach of confidentiality. State level institutions, in many cases, also undermines ISA, unless it is comprised of rape or gross physical or sexual harm. The general status of boys and girls in the society is weakened

wherein they are often not believed when they report abuse. Many survivors even face hostility upon reporting their experience of abuse. In Bangladesh, there is also a lack of awareness and education of sexual and reproductive health among children, meaning that a vast majority of children are at a loss over what constitute sexual abuse. They get confused over whether their experiences of abuse was mere ‘affectionate touch’ or a gross violation of their rights.

### **3.2.1.1 Victim blaming and the culture of impunity**

Not only there is a prevalent culture of impunity for perpetrators of abuse in Bangladesh, blaming the victim for incidents is also a common practice in Bangladesh. With the violations of women, children blamed for the abuse happening, especially in the case of girls, there is also an omnipresent cultural notion of girls being ‘spoiled’ when they fall prey to ISA or any form of CSA. In fact, ways have been adopted to diminish the seriousness of sexual abuse, such as legitimating marriage between the abuser and the abused, despite two longstanding pieces of legislation (Nari O Shishu Nirajaton Domon Act 2000 and Children’s act 1974) in Bangladesh that criminalize the practice.

From all the KIIs and documents review, the cultural practice and perceptions that have been identified as important in perpetuating ISA in Bangladesh are the general societal disbelief toward women and children compounded with their lower status within a community; sexual perceptions, for example it is normal for men to want sex, so abuse is a girl’s fault for tempting a man; the societal perception of modesty and dignity; taboos and shame.

### **3.2.1.2 ‘Elders can do no wrong’**

The cultural notion that parents, guardians, teachers and elders “can do no wrong” and whatever they do is for the betterment of the children, is one of the major reason behind the occurrence of CSA in the Bangladesh society (Siddiqui,

2001). A large portion of the society still believes in the absolute control over the body and mind of children by 'elders' until they come of age. Perpetrators of ISA often use this cultural notion to their advantage to assume control over the body of child survivors. Children, who are taught to obey the elders and not question them on any instance because they know better, get usually baffled when they experience any form of abuse by elders around them. The KII with psychologist reveals the same that "The trauma from the experience of sexual abuse compounded with the fear that they might not be believed or even punished for uttering such tabooed things in front of elders, shuns a lot of children down, and make them vulnerable to recurrent victimization." As evident from Case Study 1, the grandfather, who abused his granddaughter, did it from the belief that there is no fault in doing such unwanted touch (ador) to granddaughter and considered it as a normative behavior of expressing affection and love to granddaughter.

***Case Story 1: ISA by grandparent in Jamalpur***

*"As a grandfather I can show my affection for my granddaughter in this way"*

*Rumpa (pseudo name) is a 6 years old school-going girl from a middle-class family in Jamalpur. She lives in a joint family with her parents and grandparents. Rumpa's grandfather, who is almost 70 years old in age, resides with them and spends most of his day at home. Rumpa's grandfather, who says that he is really affectionate towards his grand-daughter, often pulled her close to his body, made her sit on his lap, and hugged her quite tightly, which Rumpa didn't like. He also used to accompany her during bath time and made her take off her dress while bathing. She used to feel discomfort at his touch and frowned at several instances. However, she was at a loss as to what to make of it, and could not*

*gather courage to express her discomfort to her parents, given the respectable status of her grandfather in the family.*

*One day, Rumpa's grandfather took her with him, informing the family that they are going for a stroll around. He then took the child to a nearby bushy area close to their residence, and started groping her. Being the little child she is, Rumpa could not bear the physical pain and shouts out loudly. Her mother noticed the sound and quickly came in her rescue. On that particular day, Rumpa decided to express her discomfort with the touch of her grandfather. However, when confronted by the family, the grandfather denied all the allegations, saying that it was only a mere depiction of love he was showing, and that it can, in no way, be termed as sexual harassment. He insisted that this is only normal for a grandfather to touch his granddaughters in whatever ways he wants to as it only shows his affection towards her, and eventually backlashed at Rumpa's mother for even bringing such a 'normal' thing up for discussion.*

### **3.2.1.3 Taboos around sex and sexuality**

The taboos and shame attached to the idea of sex or anything in even close relation to that is also, in a large part, responsible for the perpetuation of ISA. It fosters a culture of secrecy and stigma. A large number of non-habitual perpetrators resorts to CSA due to deprivation of sex or lack of ways to express or exert their sexual feelings.

This is particularly true for girls. While a young girl is expected to fulfil the role of an adult regarding household duties and responsibilities, she is not accorded the same 'adult' role regarding knowledge about her sexuality or her body. Instead, she is taught to believe that lack of knowledge, silence and ignorance about sexuality are virtues, adding value to herself



as the commodity of 'wife'. This lack of affirmation directly contributes towards the confusion felt by children about sexual violation.

*“Two of the reasons why the prevalence of ISA increased during the lockdown period is, I believe, the restriction of people’s mobility and the consequent closure of brothels around the country. Many people were forced afar from their sexual partners or other usual resort for sexual gratification for a long time. And this, at one point, may have forced them to commit CSA within family as they are usually the easiest and most vulnerable survivors around.” [KII, Sociologist]*

### **3.1.2.4 Gender inequality**

Some prevalent cultural and social belief and norms in Bangladesh instigates gender based inequalities, resulting in a lower status of girls and women across the broader social spectrum. It places them in a position of vulnerability and powerlessness, and provides a normative authority of power of men over women and girls. This affects girls disproportionately. Since male guardians are the designated protectors of girls, their vulnerability to sexual abuse increase manifold both in familial and non-familial environments when they have no male guardian around. This vulnerability also interacts with the overall socio-economic status of the survivors, and has a negative interplay with the affluence of their families or whether a scandal has tarnished the family reputation, or when the family are “outsiders” (e.g. children of sex workers) or belong to a minority group.

Moreover, gender discrimination informs the way child sexual abuse is perceived in Bangladesh. As mentioned earlier, a young girl is expected to preserve her dignity even if it takes her to hide an incidence of sexual abuse. To recognize the fact

that someone has abused her sexually is a grave shame for her along with her family, not considering her consent and role in the incidents of abuse. Lack of knowledge about sexuality is usually praised in Bangladesh that symbolizes the ‘purity’ and ‘innocence’ in children.

### 3.1.2.5 The problem around male ISA

Experiences of most ISA often go undisclosed and unrecognized. While still predominant, female sexual abuse is more widely recognized and screened for in Bangladesh, leading to a higher rate of reporting. At the same time, boys are more reluctant to seek support when victimized to ISA owing to the societal gender norms that reinforce self-reliance in men and boys, which in turn leads to a continued underestimation of the problem of male ISA in Bangladesh.

Available data suggests a substantive spike in the abuse of male child in Bangladesh over the past few years, with a consequent increase in reporting. However, gathered data from both the KIIs and secondary sources suggest that boys usually experience more confusion about the abuse. Moreover, they often be confused as to whether sexual acts with an older person are abusive because of their visible physiologic responses, emotional grooming by the abuser, and some societal views that sexual exploration with someone not much older than them is a neutral or even a positive experience, rather than potentially traumatic experience. In addition to

*Although it caught the due media attention lately, male child sexual abuse is long embedded in our culture. But no one wants to recognize it, not even the government. Everyone just glosses it over despite substantive evidence suggesting that incidents of male child abuse is on a rise, and has been jeopardizing the lives and wellbeing of millions of male children around the country” [KII, psychologist]*

that, there is an omnipresent culture of normalization when a male child is abused.

In general, the sexual abuse of young boys is perceived to be happening much less. Social constructs of masculinity that inflicts notions like boys should be able to protect themselves or the sexually penetrated is 'feminine', etc. make it likely for disclosure to be disbelieved, and consequently make it difficult for boys to report abuse. This, and a sense of discomfort in talking about issues of homosexuality and about female perpetrators of sexual abuse, precludes male child sexual abuse from gaining importance as a serious problem. (Slugget, 2003).

Adolescent boys are also becoming victim of increasing spread of cyber sexual abuse due to their frequent exposure to and inappropriate use of internet. The age appropriate curiosity to sexual material without proper education and cautionary measures put adolescent boys at high risk of being abused. The perpetrators take this as a chance to fulfill their evil intention. The Case Story 2 illustrates how cyber sexual abuse made a deep impact on an adolescent boy. The inability to share the experience and thinking of the consequences of the incidence worsened the impact of the cyber sexual abuse on the boy (case story 2).

***Case story 2: Cyber sexual abuse against male child***

*“This has happened two years ago and this is the first time I am sharing this with anyone”.*

*Faiyaz (pseudo name), a 15 years old adolescent boy helms from a well-off urban educated Dhaka family, and studies in one of the most prestigious school in Dhaka. Faiyaz informed that he is active on various*

*social media outlets from an early age, especially on Facebook. In an interesting turn of events, he met a guy on Facebook who has claimed to be of his same age. Given his friendly gesture and benevolent nature, Faiyaz started to chat quite frequently with the guy. A few days after chatting, the guy started giving him inappropriate sexual innuendos, and asked sexual favors. Stunned by his approach, Faiyaz became startled and stopped communicating with him immediately. However, it did not stop the guy who then threatened Faiyaz that he would publicize him (Faiyaz) as a homosexual if he denies to make sexual intercourse with the guy. "The screenshots of our conversation would be enough to tarnish your reputation in school," he threatened. "I felt so helpless that I could not even move from my computer for hours. I was so scared that if he decides to proceed with his threat, my whole life will turn upside down. I could imagine how everyone at school would make fun of me, tagging me a 'gay'," Faiyaz said in a startled voice.*

*Faiyaz chose to deactivate his Facebook account immediately, and fell into depression for months. "I could not even share this with anyone, neither friends nor family members, given that how it would play out in the aftermath. Being a guy, it is shameful to even speak of this thing." After a few months of absence from Facebook, the perpetrator eventually stopped preying on Faiyaz. However, the trauma induced by the incidence has left young Faiyaz startled and severely depressed for months. The repercussion of the incident has extended well beyond his personal to his academic results, and even interpersonal relations, as Faiyaz informed.*

### 3.2.2 Power, poverty and social inequality

Both the primary and secondary data collected for the study suggests that a vast majority of the survivors of CSA consist of children from otherwise powerless, poor households. The rate of underreporting in this particular cohort of socio-economic group is also high. Poverty and the consequent powerlessness has been identified as a key driver of ISA. The wider stratification in society based on socio-economic status and identities have bearings on how the children from the particular social strata is prone to ISA. As found from the KIIs, the following points illustrates how socio-economic vulnerability increase the risk of ISA.

- Children coming from minor races and ethnicities are more likely to be abused than the ones representing majority.
- Children from low socioeconomic status households are more likely to be identified as a survivors ISA than children coming from a more affluent background. For example, lower class working parents need to go to work leaving their children unprotected at home where perpetrators take the chance to sexually abuse the children.

*“Mothers come to seek treatment for their sexually abused girl child. When we do examine them medically, we understand that those girls are being raped/sexually abused for days. Unfortunately mothers come to know of these incidences after worse physical/gynaecological harm is already happened to their daughters. Such kind of abuse to a girl child is not possible by an outsider. The culprit must be any family members/close relative.” [KII, Doctor]*

- Rural children are, general, more at the risk of being victimized than the ones living in urban households due to the extended pattern of households and families, where wide range of family members get access into the house without maintaining privacy.

### 3.2.3 Impact of drug abuse

Drug abuse and intoxication among perpetrators has been

***“More and more cases of child sexual abuse by close family members involves drug. From alcohol to the newly founded Yaba (Methamphetamine), with the spread abuse of drugs, these sorts of cases are increasing. In many cases, the perpetrator is not a habitual one, rather it is purely the impact of substance abuse that lead them to commit ISA.” [KII, Law enforcer]***

cited as one of the key reasons that drives perpetrators to commit act of ISA. The issue was cited by both counselor and law enforcement KIIs and also by adolescents who participated in SDGs alike. According to them, in a vast majority of the CSA, especially in the cases of abuse by close family members including the likes of fathers happen under the influence of drugs. This concern was raised by adolescents during their group discussion where they pointed out that drug abuse is also one of the major drivers for the acts of ISA committed outside the home environment.

### 3.2.4 Family structure, spatial arrangement in the house and family cohesion

Family structure is one of the most important risk factors in child sexual abuse, according to sociologists. Children who live in nuclear family arrangements with their biological parents are generally at low risk for CSA, whereas the risk increases when children live with step-parents or a single parent. At the same time, as mentioned before, children living without either

parent (foster children, street children) are substantively more at risk of being sexually abused than children that live with both biological parents.

The spatial arrangement in the house can be an important factor that gives perpetrators an opportunity to perpetuate their evil intention to abuse. In urban slum, where houses are too congested, dark and one room shared by many, risk of

***“It does not only cause trauma, a host of studies suggest that children who grow up witnessing domestic violence have a higher chance of turning into perpetrators when they come of age. Exposure to violence at this early age lives a lifelong scar on their psyche.” [KII, Sociologist]***

ISA is high. In the dark, congested room an unattended child, especially when parents go to work, can be abused and raped by perpetrators from family, relatives or neighbors.

Family cohesion is another important factor that correlates with the chances of ISA happening in a home. In families where domestic violence is a regular occurrence, incidents of ISA is a given in those families. Children growing up witnessing violence at home, even when they are not experiencing it,

***“This is becoming increasingly difficult for working parents living in urban areas. Parents are forced to rely on supporting hands to take care of their children, which in turn, increases their vulnerability of sexual abuse.” [KII, parent]***

is ISA in itself because of the longer-lasting impact and the trauma it causes to them, hindering their healthy upbringing and jeopardizing their safety and security.

### 3.2.5 Lack of parental supervision and awareness

According to the KIs, lack of family cohesion compounded with a lack of parental supervision and awareness may not only lead children become survivors of abuse, but also may turn them into perpetrators themselves, not as much as a habitual offender, but more so out of curiosity or inappropriate learnings.

Moreover, the lack of awareness among parents about ISA is another contributing factor. This study has found that many parents in Bangladesh remains reluctant on the abusive behavior of their children. There is also a tendency of denial among such parents. Aware and open parenting are important facilitators that enable children to have access to safe adults with the skills to listen, and have the opportunity to obtain information and confidentially explore the consequences of disclosure.

This has further been compounded with the inadequate knowledge of children on CSA in Bangladesh, owing to the

#### ***Case story 3: How parents reluctance exposed two siblings to internet pornography***

*Tasfee and Tanjeem (pseudo name), 13 and 15 years old respectively, are siblings. They come from an upscale family living in Dhaka. Their father, a businessman by profession, spends most part of his day outside dealing his business. Their mother, on the other hand, is also a jobholder, who comes back home during the evening. Without their parents at home, both the siblings spend most of their day together, and their primary means of spending time at home is a computer with internet access. Invested into their own ventures, Tasfee and Tanjeem's*



*parents can barely make time for their children. For a large part of their lives, the two children grew up without any sort of parental supervision. Their exposure to the cyberspace, in this line, was also boundless and free of supervision. Somehow, the two siblings got exposed to internet pornography. Coupled with the reluctance of their parents toward their healthy upbringing and their absence, the siblings were curious and wanted to try the things they have seen online on themselves.*

*This has resulted in unprotected sexual relationship between the two siblings, who had neither any idea nor any concept on what this behaviors entails , and how it is forbidden among siblings. Without any knowledge of their parents on what they are doing when they are home alone together, they kept on engaging in sexual intercourse. Eventually, Tasfee got pregnant, and that is when their parents got to know about their exposure to child pornography, and how it promoted them to act it out on themselves.*

stigma and taboos around the subject. Data suggests that even when incidents of ISA are reported, chances of having legal justice for ISA is quite low. Of 68 cases of sexual abuse investigated in one study, the law was activated only twice (UNICEF, 2015). The policy measures undertaken by the government has been cited as insufficient and ineffective by most of the respondents. Besides, definitions issues in the relevant legal and policy measures often resulted in creating loopholes, which are being exploited by abusers to escape the judiciary. Moreover, due to the sensitivity of the issue that challenges traditional social norms and puts sensitive relations to question, there is not enough programmatic intervention by the government to prove into the issues, a devise effective strategies to prevent ICSA from taking place in the first place.

## 3.3 Impact of ISA on children

Studies suggest that the early experience of child abuse can trigger changes in child's behavior including discipline problems, insomnia, nightmares, anxiety, depression, among other problems. This also causes problem with mental development of a child and impact on their work in adulthood (Wohab and Akhter 2010). Experience of abuse substantially shape their feelings, empathy, sympathy, reasoning, rational thinking and benevolence. Children who have been abused or neglected are more likely to be arrested as juvenile offenders & are more likely to be a sadist and involve in criminal activities as an adult. (Islam and Akhter, 2016).

ISA is a chronic type of problem, rather than acute, which almost always occurs in conjunction with other forms of harm, and almost always involves emotional abuse. Sexual abuse can have long-term impact on the emotional, social and educational development of children, and can be linked to the development of mental health issues in their later life. It also impacts on the peer and surrounding of the survivors. Fisher et al, (2017) noted some adverse outcomes across the life course of CSA survivors, such as physical health problems, including immediate impacts and long-term illness and disability.; poor mental health and wellbeing.; externalizing behaviors such as substance misuse, 'risky' sexual behaviors, and offending; difficulties in interpersonal relationships.; socio-economic impacts, including lower levels of education and income; vulnerability to revictimization, both as a child and as an adult.

Similar kind of impact has been identified from data collected for this study:

### 3.3.1 Reproductive and sexual health impact:

In terms of physical impact, survivors of severe abuse, especially rape, often faces early pregnancy and death in many cases. Scur in sexual tract and sexually Transmitted Diseases are

other prime physical health concern stemming from ISA, as reported by the medical doctor interviewed. While these manifestations are not unique to ISA, the combination and intensity of CSA happening in family context worsens the impact.

### **3.3.2 Mental health and behavioral impact/trauma:**

According to KIs (counselor), early experience of child abuse can trigger changes in child's behavior including discipline problems, insomnia, nightmares, anxiety, depression, among other problems. This also causes problem with mental development of a child. Experience of abuse substantially impact their feelings, empathy, sympathy, reasoning, rational thinking and benevolence.

Children, especially those abused by someone within the family, suffer a unique set of repercussions than those abused outside the family. Distinct features, according to psychological studies, include an increased guilt about the incidents of abuse, thereby a reluctance to disclose abuse, and a higher likelihood of recantation. Moreover, in many cases, they face coercion from caregivers or close family members to recant and/or change a disclosure. There is also some evidence to suggest that children who have experienced intra-familial abuse show less improvement following therapy and may be

*I dealt with a boy child at school's junior section who used to try to lift the skirt of his girl classmates and he used to do it repeatedly. After we noticed that, we called that child's parents at school. The parents, at the beginning, tried to accuse us for blaming his child. But eventually, we came to know from the parents and from the boy that the boy had observed some sexual abuse incidents at home. [KI1, school teacher]*

more subject to the cumulative impact of polyvictimization that may continue till adulthood, owing to exposure to both sexual and emotional abuse.

### 3.3.3 Impact on peers and families:

Experience of ISA can have impact not only on the victim but also can impact on the learning and socialization of peers. The depression and behavioral changes of ISA victim can also influence the behavior of school friends and play mates.

The KII of school teacher reveals how exposure to ISA can cumulatively impact on the children's peer and larger surrounding. The families of the children also can go through trauma, interrupted family relations and interpersonal relations as a result of not being able to talk about or seek help the incidents as well as not being able to protect children from it.

According to KI (OCC) factors which may influence the impact of abuse include its severity and duration, the age at which it occurred, the relationship between victim and perpetrator and other difficulties and supports in a child's life. However, this is to be noted that only a handful of research differentiates impact of intra-familial abuse by gender of abuser or victim.

However, as they pointed out, not every child who experiences sexual abuse suffers serious consequences. The poorest outcomes tend to be for children whose sexual abuse is combined with other adversities (such as bereavement) and/or other forms of maltreatment (Finkelhor et al, 2007), and recent research suggests that it is the accumulation of victimization across the life course that has the most negative effects (Scott et al, 2015).

# 4. Gaps in data on ISA

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Despite the growing interest in researching violence against children in Bangladesh, this study has found a huge gap in the data on ISA, in Bangladesh. There is an omnipresent lack of quality, age sex disaggregated data on the incidents of ISA. Government organizations in Bangladesh providing different services to the survivors of ISA collect data on the survivors that only comprises of basic demographic data and at best, the nature of the crime, while any sort of organized data regarding the perpetrators hardly exist.

Researchers' access to the data gathered by these same organisations is yet another issue contributing to the lack of a comprehensive understanding of ISA in Bangladesh. Key service providing organizations including the One-Stop-Crisis centers and the Bangladesh Police, abide by a rigid data sharing policy, meaning that outsiders have no to very little access to the data gained by them. On the other hand, most analysis done by the same agencies using their own data are somewhat superficial and lacks in-depth analysis of the underlying socio-economic factors. On the other hand, researchers face significant challenges in gathering qualitative data from the survivors and perpetrators due to sensitivity and confidentiality around the issue. As mentioned earlier, the massive underreporting of ISA and CSA in general creates further bottlenecks to make educated estimations on the prevalence of ISA as well as to scrutinize the factors giving rise to the phenomenon.

The CSA research sector has been found to be highly fragmented with many isolated research activities, lacking a centralized database and with limited awareness of the true scope of research in this area. Key informants expressed skepticism towards the methods used in) a number of

ISA studies. The call for studies surveys focusing more on uncovering the underlying reasons for violence against children rather than concentrating solely on prevalence was made by most KIs.

The knowledge gaps and data needs mentioned by the KIs were, in general, the result of the perceived weaknesses, including the need to develop better tools and methodologies. Another concern was the content of the surveys. Some KIs expected surveys to stop concentrating on obtaining prevalence data and uncover the underlying reasons for violence against children. In this way, future studies could provide actionable insights to help address the issue at a programmatic level, they informed.

*“We don’t have a holistic perspective on it yet. Most of the studies conducted are retrospective cohort studies where different groups were examined and has been observed longtime to evaluate their healing process. We need more case based studies than on perspectives. Data from the survivors are still rare since reaching out to respondents is quite challenging considering the cultural, legal and sensitivity issues.” [KII, Sociologist]*

# 5. Research and methodological recommendations

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Compiling the overview of the secondary data, the viewpoints of KIs as well as the review process undertaken by the researchers, this study makes a set of specific methodological recommendations that can be considered by researchers while designing research and programmatic interventions into ISA in Bangladesh. The key recommendations are summarized below:

## 5.1 Research Need

**Large scale quantitative survey:** To estimate the nationwide prevalence of ISA, a large-scale quantitative research is the entry point to determine the magnitude of the problem, in order to raise public awareness and to lobby governments to address the problem, including promoting the development of psychosocial support mechanisms.

**Study on perpetrators:** Questions on perpetrators need to distinguish adults from peers; relationship between perpetrator and victim (whether known, unknown, family member type, boyfriend/girlfriend, person in position of trust or authority, etc.). Questions must revolve around settings/ locations for abuse. Without knowing the viewpoints of the perpetrators and identifying what triggers them to be abusers, policy and programmatic interventions would never work. The existing victim-centered discourse is not simply enough to devise effective actions and influence transformative change across the broad social spectrum.

**Study on urban-rural variation on ISA :** There is a need to further understand the way in which urban or rural communities acknowledge, believe in and act upon children being sexually abused at home.

**Perception of children and adolescents on ISA:** It is important to explore how children define or perceive ISA themselves. This will not only help to broaden the understanding in regards, but also to design culturally sensitive and appropriate interventions through qualitative and quantitative measures. Research on children’s participation in the family and other social institutions (educational, religious, etc.) can identify situations in which girls and boys are able to express themselves and circumstances in which their views are taken into consideration. This will help in developing appropriate psychosocial support mechanisms with the involvement of children, and in promoting a society that respects children’s views and acts according to children’s agendas.

**Family-community structure and norms and its relation to ISA:** In order to better understand the social and cultural context of Bangladesh, specific probes should be made in to the existing family and community structures and norms and values, such as the notions of shame and honor in Bangladesh. This is absolutely crucial for designing policy and programmatic interventions built on positive, supportive and child-friendly values, structures and mechanisms.

**Coping mechanism of families and children:** Specific focus should also be given on the coping mechanism of families’ and children’s when victimized. Researchers need to make sure that children’s own perception of child sexual abuse (who abuses them, why they think adults abuse children, what can be done to prevent and address child sexual abuse, etc.) are taken into account.



**Gender relations, gender discriminations and ISA:** Research works should address gender relations, masculinities and sexuality in the Bangladeshi context and how it fosters taboos and create barriers to prevent ISA. More research needs to be done on how ISA affects children of various backgrounds, especially children with various forms of special needs.

## 5.2 Methodological recommendations

**Access to and availability of data:** The main concern of study of ISA is scarcity of data and getting access to whatever data is available, both from primary and secondary sources. The record of sexual abuse is kept confidentially in law enforcement office, Government office and social welfare department. With proper permission, this data can be available to the social researcher based on the assurance of confidentiality and clear methodology of data analysis and reporting.

**Generating primary data:** A questionnaire survey, keeping the anonymity of the respondents, can be administered at a large scale. The structured questionnaire can only address any incidents of ISA the respondents have ever experienced, demographic profile, perpetrator's information. The respondents, i.e., adolescent and youth for such structured questionnaire survey, can be reached through school, with the ethical assurance of maintaining the confidentiality of schools and respondents and based on the official permission of the authority.

**Use of self-administered survey:** The risk of breaching the confidentiality will be less in self-administered structured quantitative questionnaire survey than in qualitative data collection. As in such survey the respondents do not need to contact any researcher face to face to share his/her experience of ISA.

**Data on perpetrators:** The highly important, yet most neglected area of research, is perpetrators perspectives and experiences. To collect data from the perpetrators, social researchers, with proper ethical permission, clear methodology of data collection and analysis can be given access to where they are sent for prosecution or rehabilitation.

**Methods to be used to do ISA research on vulnerable children and adolescents:** The method to be used to ask children with special needs about their experiences will need to be appropriate and accessible for children with different types of impairment. In-depth qualitative research with children and young people, particularly from vulnerable and marginalized groups, is needed to explore these methodological, ethical and conceptual issues. Targeted surveys that aim to gather data from specific groups of vulnerable children need to use measures that allow some comparability with prevalence rates of abuse within the general population.

## 5.3 Relevant Stakeholders and the role they can play to prevent and respond to ISA

Below is a list of relevant stakeholder and how can they play a positive role in the prevention of ISA as well as in the response to ISA incidents:

Stakeholder	Role
Parents	Increasing awareness on ISA, proper parental supervision

Stakeholder	Role
Children	Awareness on ISA and what can they do to prevent ISA as well as how to deal with their experiences of ISA
Educators	Increasing understanding of ISA among children, and how to safeguard themselves, Increasing SRHR knowledge among children
Law enforcement	Ensuring full and proper implementation of laws and policies regarding ISA
Policy-makers	Inclusive and proactive policy-making for the prevention of ISA and ensuring proper justice and rehabilitation of survivors
Ministry of Women and Children Affairs/ Ministry of Social Welfare	Implementing concerted programmes for the prevention of ISA at all levels
Religious/ Community leaders	Increasing awareness on ISA in light of social/religious views
Academicians	Generating evidence on ISA and exploring the underlying causes
Civil Society Organizations	Raising community awareness on ISA
NGOs	Devising and implementing targeted interventions to prevent and respond to ISA
Development Partners/ UN	Emphasizing on the need to address through policy and programmatic measures; Increasing funding for the cause

# 6. Conclusion

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ISA is a menacing threat that makes millions of children around the world suffer in silence. In Bangladesh too, the problem has taken a pervasive form and has been spread across the different socio-economic strata of Bangladesh. The toll that incidents of CSA takes on the abused children does not only confine within the limits of the survivors' physical and psycho-social wellbeing, rather it transcends well beyond individual and communities and extend to the state. Survivors carry, in many instances, carry forward the psycho-social damage caused by ISA to their adulthood. If we are to consider the generational impact of ISA and combine the total number of children survivors over the decades, this would denote to a substantive proportion of the total population of Bangladesh, whose health and wellbeing have been jeopardized, at least at some point of their life, by ISA.

Concerted actions from all stakeholders, including the government, academia, civil society, development partners, NGOs, adolescent and youth, community leaders etc. are need to counter this menacing threat and prevent this incident from happening both at the household environment and outside. Policy and programmatic measures need to be undertake based on strong quality research and data evidence with the meaningful participation of all stakeholders, especially children and adolescents.

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