

CHILD ABUSE IN THE PHILIPPINES:

An Integrated Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography

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The efforts of the United Nations and the international community of non-governmental organizations to promote and protect the rights of the child have generated a wealth of information on the challenges facing the world's children. Researches on the situation of children has revealed that among these challenges is the fact that millions are exposed to the dangers of abuse, whether it be physical, mental, emotional or sexual. But studies on child abuse thus far have been largely exploratory to a great extent because of the apparently more urgent aims of fact-finding and exposure of the issue. While this may have facilitated the inarguably pressing need for campaign and service-delivery, it is time to generate a more systematic and comprehensive knowledge of child abuse in the Philippines.

This study on child abuse in the Philippines was undertaken at the request of PLAN International, an international, humanitarian and child-focused development organization. PLAN intends to support programs and services for victims/survivors of child abuse in the Philippines. But for PLAN to develop a program of action to combat child abuse, it must understand the complexities of the problem and analyze the range of intervention programs already existing, establish the ingredients of successful interventions and identify the gaps which still need to be addressed. The following summarizes the salient points of the review.

Understanding the Phenomenon of Child Abuse

The study raised some conceptual issues regarding child abuse. As it is widely understood is synonymous with the concept of children in especially difficult circumstances (CEDCs) popularized by the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the mid 1980s. Child abuse is seen not as a distinct social phenomenon but often as a feature of the other phenomena or situations such as child labor and child prostitution.

The development of the discourse on child abuse has been along its specific categories including sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, child labor exploitation. where much of the literature has focused and which we already have a profound understanding of. This has encouraged conceptual debates in each category of abuse. Terminologies are coined and distinct groups of children are identified based on the unique and common characteristics of children. This, in turn, has served to refine intervention work and has proven to be successful in calling public attention to each of the phenomenon.

The study noted with serious concern that most of the literature is written in English. The development of the discourse on child abuse is **not** in the local language in which children develop a profound understanding of themselves and construct their daily lives.

The conceptual issues raised and the problem of definition have concrete implications in terms of accurately monitoring the incidence of child abuse. Because of these still unresolved issues, current monitoring work leaves much to be desired in terms of establishing the true scale and magnitude of the problem. For monitoring work to be effective, it should also look into the dimensions of historicity, frequency, severity and range.

The question of incidence is generally limited to the question of the number of children involved. Even in this limited frame, a number of problems were identified. These were the frequent use of (gu)estimates, differences in terminology, undefined and overlapping scope, different age grouping and a bias towards the situation in the urban centers. These basic problems or inadequacies seriously undermine the capacity for analysis, comparison and integration of information over time.

There is abuse that is hidden, and thus escapes the current monitoring and intervention work of government and non-government organizations. These are the cases of children in bonded labor and the child domestic workers, two issues which have received interest of late. Other forms of abuse remain hidden under the protective mantle of the social institutions where they occur. Examples of these are abuse in the school-setting and abuse perpetuated by members of the clergy.

A study of child abuse would not be complete without attention to the abusers or the perpetrators of child abuse. In tackling this, the study adapted the frame used in the study of sex exploiters, and termed it the “triangle of abusers” to refer to the “users”, “suppliers” and “protectors”. The literature on the perpetrators is most developed in the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children. Often blame is cast on the “other” (e.g. foreign pedophiles, tourism) for the rising incidence of child prostitution. However, recent studies have established that there is an increasing number of “users” in our midst, i.e. in our family, neighborhood and community. Distancing from the “other” also entails a look at the elements in our social and cultural milieu that allows the perpetuation of the phenomenon of child abuse. The triangular network of abusers have become so viciously entangled and complex that it renders intervention and policy work more difficult.

Looking at the perpetrators in the context of a network, and not as an error confined to a single person or a family, refines the analysis of the phenomenon of child abuse. It suggests that there is a vast, complex, and sometimes, organized network of abusers with each one reinforcing each other’s interests, thus perpetuating the abuse of children. Aside from the more common profile of abusers, the study highlighted the role of the media, service-providers, family-members and the government and how they become part of the network of abusers. The triangle of abusers frame reinforces the idea that one need not have a direct hand or participation in the abuse of the child. Whether as

“user”, “supplier” or “protector” or simply by allowing the culture of silence, fear and apathy to reign, everyone can contribute to the perpetuation of the phenomenon of child abuse. Corollarily, combatting child abuse is a social responsibility. It requires the dismantling of the network of abusers.

There are six elements that constitute child abuse and understanding these helps us better understand child abuse as a distinct social phenomenon and, concomitantly, to determine the type, method and extent of intervention to be used. The six elements are: type of abuse, circumstance of abuse, degree and duration of the abuse, age, gender, and the perpetrator.

The Programs and Methods of Intervention

There are programs and services for the victims/survivors of child abuse in different places and in various settings. These are delivered by non-government organizations and government institutions, particularly the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the National Bureau of Investigation. Notable are the initiatives in training the police and other law enforcers in the sensitive handling of abused children. Medical institutions, e.g. hospitals, have offered specialized treatment of physical and psychological trauma of the victims, and have networked closely with the government and non-government communities in bringing the abusers to court.

The programs and services for the victims/survivors of child abuse intend to: respond to the physical and psychological effects of abuse; rescue the children victims from their abusers; bring child abusers to court; reach out to potential victims of abuse, e.g. through street-based education; and, organize and mobilize the communities in detecting, responding to, and preventing child abuse.

But there are still problems and gaps in the implementation of programs and services. The following are the most significant:

- * Though the Barangay Council for the Welfare of Children is one of the first agencies to receive reports of child abuse, it is not adequately equipped to handle such cases.

- * The conduct of interviews needs to be improved. Child victims are asked the same questions by the police and health professionals, among others. More emphasis should be given in child-sensitive interviewing skills, and the more basic listening skills.

- * Despite declarations and initiatives of the PNP in assisting the child victims of abuse and in prevention efforts, there are still documented cases of child abuse perpetrated by the police themselves.

- * Because most abused children are seen by doctors and other health professionals either for treatment or for medico-legal purposes, more emphasis should be given to training more health professionals in the detection and sensitive handling of child abuse cases.

* Casework and documentation of child abuse cases are notably below par due to the heavy caseload of social workers and other child care workers. A pressing need therefore is a “care for caregivers” program to ensure quality of casework.

* The cultural and gender elements that cause and perpetuate child abuse are not adequately addressed in the existing programs and methods of intervention for child abuse.

* Terms in intervention work are often used interchangeably and loosely, with no elaboration provided. Documentation of intervention methods and strategies is wanting. Any revisions or innovations on the methods used, applied or adapted are lost.

The interventions as discussed in the literature have basically focused on the psychosocial needs of the victims/survivors of child abuse. There is a need to emphasize the physical effects of abuse on the child which may range from slight nutritional deprivation to crippling injuries. For obvious reasons, cases of children with serious physical injuries are often highlighted and the fact that most cases of child abuse involve mild to moderate physical injuries is often overlooked. No matter how slight, the physical effects of abuse can affect the physical and intellectual development of the child. More emphasis therefore should be given on the bio-psychosocial needs of the victims/survivors of child abuse.

Education is the most widely practiced form of preventive intervention. It is used in both formal (e.g. scholarships) and informal (e.g. street-based education) settings with a satisfactory degree of success. Training programs for child care workers and other professionals have likewise been generally successful. However, the conduct of these tends to be “donor-driven” or directed by what intervention is currently “in vogue” and not based on a thorough assessment of training needs.

In general, the theories, methods and approaches used in intervention work are dominantly based on western models. Regrettably, there is a dearth in local theorizing from a Philippine perspective. Moreover, existing interventions work for child abuse cases is basically eclectic, with the government and non-government responding in different ways. It can be said that intervention work is still at a stage of *pakapa-kapa*, an experimental stage where the most effective method still has yet to be identified. Intervention work on child abuse in the Philippines, then, needs to be elevated to the next level, with proper documentation and impact evaluation as requisites: the development of localized theories and methodologies for helping the victims/survivors of child abuse.

Conclusion

The large body of literature gathered for this review (a total of 189 selected references were annotated) reflects the volume of interest the problem has generated over the years, no less sparked by the global rights consciousness. It reflects the spectrum of social, political, and economic actors, the producers of information dealing with the issue of child abuse, and indicative of their varying, and often contradictory, views of the problem

and of the variety of interventions, strategies, and actions developed in the victim protection and rehabilitation, and prevention of child abuse.

However, after more than a decade of involvement with the issue, whether it be in the form of intervention, advocacy or research, it is time to evaluate what we know and identify what we still need to know. It is only when new and localized constructions or definition of the problem --and not what is the most convenient and readily available-- are used that intervention and other support programs for children will make a qualitative difference. It is hoped that this review has taken the crucial first steps towards this endeavor. (Reprinted from UP-CIDS Chronicle, January-June 1998)