Our failure to protect sexually abused children: Where is our ‘willing suspension of disbelief’?

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An adolescent institutionalized boy is admitted to a hospital for behavior problems. During treatment and therapy, he disclosed that he and other children in the institution were being sexually abused by a volunteer working there. The treating team discusses the matter with the child, persuades him to allow them to report the matter to relevant authorities, and thus informs the Child Welfare Committee and the Special Juvenile Police Unit; the latter takes immediate action and arrests the volunteer, i.e., the alleged perpetrator of abuse. Following this, the institution staff come to the hospital, vent their fury on the child, ask him why he said such things about the volunteer, also pleading with the treating team to “please believe” them and stating that the child was a known liar and that the volunteer was “not that kind of person” and was incapable of abusing children. It also turns out that the child had reported the abuse earlier at the institution, wherein after some apparently desultory enquiry, the response of the institution was that “children often lie about things.”

Consider the above situation, in terms of what it means for child protection in the context of sexual abuse (CSA). In recent years, with increasing reports of CSA incidents, the discourse on CSA prevention and response has been propelled into legal, educational, medical, institutional, and public policy domains; a law against child sexual abuse has come into existence (POCSO 2012); medical and forensic protocols have been developed; schools conduct abuse prevention programs; child care institution staff are trained in identification of and systemic and psychosocial responses to child sexual abuse; the government has put forth a child protection policy as well as has mechanisms such as the Integrated Child Protection Scheme to monitor children’s safety; large nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Childline have been setup to report child sexual abuse incidents; and some NGOs even exclusively work on CSA assistance and advocacy. The discourse has entered public spaces, and people’s homes with social and print media providing awareness messages on the issue; innumerable conferences, workshops and meetings have been held by government departments, academic institutions, NGOs and other civil society groups to critique, discuss and disseminate information, and decide on appropriate action on CSA issues. Yet, when an individual child is abused, the story still plays out as if we live in times of pre-POCSO and no public awareness of CSA. Why is this so?

Many critiques on CSA responses focus on systemic failures to protect the child following abuse—and indeed these are legitimate: lack of protocols for CSA response in child care/educational institutions, families not knowing whom to approach when CSA happens, and poor coordination between institutions and teams providing medical, psychosocial and legal assistance to the child occur, result in poor quality assistance, and further traumatization of the child. However, there is something far more germane to child sexual abuse reporting and response: that of adult (dis) belief in the child.

**WHY CHILDREN LIE**

Adult belief that children tell lies (i.e., not tell the truth) may easily be countered by the fact that adults tell lies too—in
In most instances, children lie to hide things, out of a fear of something or someone; they are afraid that if they tell the truth, they will not be believed and/or they will be admonished and punished. This is exactly what happens in the context of child sexual abuse also: children hide the abuse and do not report it because they are afraid they will be disbelieved and/or punished for it.

In fact, for those children who report sexual abuse, they start to retract their original statement because of pressure from disbelieving adults, which results in fear and anxiety in the child. Hence, retraction of the child’s statement is not only because of the child’s fear of the perpetrator (which undoubtedly is also true in many instances); it is the so-called caregivers and protectors of the child, who are responsible for the child’s failure to disclose abuse and for his/her retraction of the abuse statement later on—because of their intrinsic lack of belief in the child’s experience and account.

**WHAT CHILDREN (DO NOT) LIE ABOUT**

Next, let us examine the nature of children’s lies and what the implications are for CSA. Children’s lies are usually regarding: complaints about other children/people’s aggressive or violent behaviors toward them (if children do want to lie about adults, it is most likely to be about verbal and physical abuse), having aggressed on or bullied others themselves, being in places they were not actually in, homework and other activities they should have done but have not, sexual and romantic interests (in case of adolescents), and having taken something that did not belong to them.

You will notice that all these are situations that tend to have a social desirability factor, i.e., children lie about them because they recognize that these might not be socially appropriate or acceptable behaviors and they fear punishment (by adults) if they were to tell the truth. Children also tend to lie when they have been victims of sexual abuse, for the same reasons—because they have a sense that sexual behaviors (by anyone) are not socially appropriate or acceptable. Therefore, ironically, children are more likely to lie that they have NOT been abused when they have been abused! Indeed, many children simply deny that they have been abused even when there is evidence to the contrary. Consequently, given the nature of what children lie about, and their reluctance to tell the truth when they have been abused, if they do disclose sexual abuse experiences, they are unlikely to be lies.

**CHILDREN’S ABILITIES TO “MAKE UP STORIES” ON SEXUAL ABUSE**

If viewed through the child development lens, younger children (under the age of 12), physiologically, cognitively, and emotionally are not ready for sexual activity in that they also have little knowledge and awareness about sex and sexuality. It is therefore absurd to say that children are “making up stories” about sexual abuse—how can a child concoct stories about an issue he/she knows nothing about? And for this reason, when young children are observed to be engaging in behaviors that appear sexual, it is likely that that they have witnessed sexual behaviour or that someone has performed these behaviors with them—someone doing them to another person—which is when we suspect that a child has been sexually abused versus blaming the child for engaging in socially inappropriate behaviors.

**TABOOS ABOUT THE BODY AND SEXUALITY—HOW THEY AFFECT CHILDREN’S DISCLOSURE ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE**

In addition to not being at the developmental stage to be able to know about sex and sexuality issues, children most often do not recognize the abuse experience as being (sexually) abusive. They are just reporting what was done to them, i.e., there is no awareness that what was done to them was abusive or exploitative, especially where abuse processes entail lure and grooming; at best, they feel ‘dirty’ or uncomfortable, that too because of the taboos and shame socio-culturally associated with touching or talking about the human body, private parts, and sexual issues. In fact, it is this discomfort (inculcated in them by the adult world that socializes and educates children) that also causes them to lie when they have been abused, i.e., it would be inappropriate, they feel, to say that they have been touched in the (“dirty”) private parts by someone. This feeling is heightened in older children or adolescents, even if they have some understanding of sexuality issues and of sexual abuse, are unwilling to disclose and report the abuse.

Where CSA processes entailed violence and coercion, younger children are merely reporting hurt and injury and associated feelings of fear—again, they are unlikely to see the act of abuse as being exploitative, abusive (let alone criminal). Interestingly, when children report hurt and injury caused by means other than sexual abuse, adults readily believe them and are sympathetic and helpful. Surprisingly and disappointingly, when this hurt and injury is caused by sexual abuse, adults tend to be less sympathetic and helpful—in fact, they do not want to believe or even know more about how it happened. Adults’ disbelief and denial may be attributed to their own fears, confusions, and discomforts around the issue and how to respond to CSA, especially when it is by a known person or family member/caregiver. However, no matter how legitimate adults’ fears and confusions, how can they be greater than the fears and confusions of a child who has experienced the trauma of sexual abuse? And how in the world can they justify adults’ positions of disbelief in the child’s experience?
What we are arguing here is that frequently, when children report sexual abuse experiences, they are reporting experiences of discomfort, hurt or injury (as the case may be, depending on the nature and severity of the abuse). The fact that it is an act of (sexual) abuse is an adult interpretation, based on adults’ (superior) knowledge and understanding of the issue, which adults then use to disbelieve children because it is simply not comfortable or convenient for adults to believe them.

Furthermore, children who report sexual abuse cannot be said to be lying and accused of having a vendetta, as there is no motive, and there is no motive because there is no awareness of the consequences of the abuse to the perpetrator, let alone knowing what POCSO says or that it even exists.

The phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” finds its origins in the poem “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” written by the Romantic Poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He meant that the reader would need to accept the poem or narrative, at least temporarily, by entering the poet’s world and believing in how he perceived it, for long enough to appreciate his work and vision. Thus, the phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” means a willingness to suspend one’s critical faculties and believe the (so-called) unbelievable or implausible. In the context of CSA, adults must suspend the adult-centric, critical faculties that decide that children would lie about or make up stuff about sexual abuse and that an alleged perpetrator is “incapable” of abusing a child; only then will adults be able to enter the world of children, perceive, and understand their experiences and appreciate and believe what adults otherwise find unbelievable or implausible.

There are medical, legal, and psychosocial systems setup to assist and protect sexually abused children — as cynical as we may be about their workings and limitations, and as valid as our opinions may be, they do function for the most part. The public is aware of child sexual abuse, today more than ever before and readily acknowledges that CSA happens — though perhaps as long as it does not occur in their homes and immediate social surroundings!

However, our failure to protect sexually abused children stems most fundamentally from our disbelief in children and childhood experiences. From a child’s perspective, it is not a “man’s world” as is commonly said... but it is an adult’s world—a world which is governed by power, hierarchy, and patriarchy and which consequently sets the rules for adult-child relationships. These rules are characterized by expectation, instruction, and obedience: adults have certain expectations that children must fulfill, adults will instruct, and children must obey. Sadly, we must now add to this list of already undesirable characteristics, adults’ disbelief in children. How can a sexually abused child (or any child, for that matter) express a thought or voice an opinion, narrate an event or disclose a sensitive issue, and report an abuse experience, in a world where adults refuse to engage, in willing suspension of disbelief?

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