

Research Article

An Exploratory Study on Children's Awareness Regarding Children's Rights: Focusing on Their Understanding of the Right to Bodily Safety

Weerasinghe Nuwan Dhanushka ND

Assistant Lecturer, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.

I N F O

E-mail Id:

nuwandhanushka512@gmail.com

Orcid Id:

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0087-358X>

How to cite this article:

Dhanushka W N. An Exploratory Study on Children's Awareness Regarding Children's Rights: Focusing on Their Understanding of the Right to Bodily Safety. *J Adv Res Humani Social Sci* 2024; 11(3): 28-33.

Date of Submission: 2024-09-07

Date of Acceptance: 2024-12-03

A B S T R A C T

Child rights are essential for safeguarding the welfare and preservation of children; however, the extent to which children are aware of these rights is frequently disregarded. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather data from a mixed group of 100 school students aged 15 to 16 years. The collection of quantitative data involved the administration of structured surveys. In contrast, qualitative insights were acquired via focus group discussions and interviews to assess participants' comprehension of diverse facets of child rights, especially bodily safety healthcare, education, protection against abuse, and participation. According to the study, 72% of the participants exhibited a rudimentary comprehension of their rights, whereas 20% displayed a restricted level of awareness. A total of 8% of the participants lack any knowledge regarding juvenile rights. Preliminary analysis indicates that participants possess differing degrees of awareness. Although confident children comprehensively comprehend fundamental rights like healthcare, education, and protection against violence, others display limited awareness, specifically about more intricate rights like freedom of expression and participation in decision-making. Age, gender, socioeconomic status, educational background, and parental educational levels were analysed to identify significant correlations with awareness levels. Furthermore, the research investigated the information sources about child rights and the obstacles children face in obtaining such data. The results underscore the significance of implementing focused educational interventions to improve children's understanding of their rights. These interventions can enable children to assert their rights, foster an environment that values and respects the rights of children, and ultimately result in more equitable and inclusive societies. Furthermore, the research offers valuable perspectives on the efficacy of educational endeavours concerning children's rights and sheds light on potential avenues for enhancing consciousness among students in academic institutions. Ultimately, this contributes to the empowerment and safeguarding of children's rights.

Keywords: Bodily Safety, Child Abuse, Child Rights

Introduction

Children are naive, dependable, and overflowing with optimism. Children are inherently entitled to survival, growth, protection, and involvement in life-altering decision-making processes. Children worldwide are compelled to labour under situations of explicit enslavement. They experience physical, psychological, and sexual torture, are coerced into participating in wars as soldiers or sex slaves, and are treated as commodities to be bought and sold, enduring more torment.¹ Numerous boys and girls are employed as soldiers, chefs, spies, and in various other roles in violent wars globally. Numerous children are conscripted and utilized in violent conflicts globally. From 2005 to 2022, about 105,000 youngsters were confirmed to have been recruited and utilized by conflicting parties, however, the true number of incidents is assumed to be far greater.² Children's rights have been codified into legislation. However, it is essential to recognise that this is a societal rather than a legal regulation. In essence, its successful enforcement relies on individuals altering their behaviour rather than through punitive measures. The issue of child abuse, which involves the violation of children's rights, has received significant attention in recent years. Child abuse, namely the act of sexually exploiting children, is a grave criminal offence that has become an essential societal issue in all communities. Accordingly, multiple causes contribute to the victimisation of children by sexual abuse in the world. Among them, lack of awareness regarding child rights and child abuse is also prevalent, particularly among children. Frequently, the child is unaware that he is the victim of sexual abuse or being violated his or her rights to bodily safety.

Child rights refer to the essential liberties and innate entitlements that belong to every individual who is under the age of 18. These rights apply to every kid, regardless of the child's or their parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, creed, or any other status. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a child is any human under eighteen years old, unless the law applies to the child, the majority is attained earlier.³ This definition ensures that children worldwide are recognised as rights-holders and entitled to certain protections and opportunities as outlined in the convention. Following the United Nations' establishment of the definition of children in 1989 and the subsequent clarification of the notion of abuse in 1999, global attention became centred on children. The World Health Organisation asserts that child sexual abuse is a highly intricate circumstance. Acts of sexual abuse against children can be classified as rape, aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse of children, adultery, gross immorality between individuals, unnatural acts, child molestation, and inappropriate postings and displays. Ac-

ording to the World Health Organisation, approximately 75% of children, or 300 million children between the ages of 2 and 4, experience frequent physical punishment and psychological violence from their parents and caretakers. Approximately 20% of women and 7.7% of men disclose experiencing childhood sexual abuse between the ages of 20 and 17. A total of 120 million girls and young women below the have experienced various instances of coerced sexual interaction worldwide.⁴

Asian countries have a higher rate of child sexual abuse than other countries. According to the United Nations, South Asia and Cambodia account for 50% of all child trafficking. Most of these children must engage in sexual activity. Every year, an estimated 200,000 women and children in Pakistan are sold into slavery. As a result, some people are sold into the sex industry. By 1991, India had 500,000 child prostitutes, while Bangladesh had 100,000. AIDS patients are sexually attacked on a large scale throughout Asia due to ignorance and informality. AIDS is responsible for one out of every three deaths in Thailand. According to 1999 figures, 4,000 AIDS cases under the age of 25 were reported in Bangladesh, 1,200,000 in India, 11,000 in Nepal, 24,000 in Pakistan, and 2,500 in Sri Lanka. The majority of them are young children.⁵⁻⁷

Research conducted in Sri Lanka shows that currently, 18% of boys and 5.4% of girls under the age of 18 have been sexually abused as children. However, the amount of sexual abuse of children in Sri Lanka is much higher than in the present. Furthermore, as per the data from the National Child Protection Authority of Sri Lanka, a total of 929 complaints regarding child sexual abuse were received in the year 2023⁸ A total of 50 incidents of rape, 403 cases of grave sexual abuse, 7 cases of incest, and 469 incidents of sexual harassment have been documented. Accordingly, numerous researchers have given the variables influencing the occurrence of child sexual abuse. Meanwhile, Udayakumara and Niranjana explored the impact of family environmental factors on the incidence of child sexual abuse in their research article.⁹ It demonstrates that children from broken households are vulnerable to child abuse. Also, in that study, issues such as poor inter-parental relationships and parental drug usage are cited as causes. Additionally, unemployment is a significant contributor to child sexual abuse. Alcohol usage, poverty, and various other variables can even result in divorce. To manage the stress of unemployment, an individual may resort to many forms of abuse, including sexual abuse.¹⁰ Heterogeneous results indicate that unemployment exerts a more significant influence on young children. An increase of one unit in unemployment will ultimately lead to a rise in all forms of abuse. Also, poverty is a substantial factor contributing to child sexual abuse. The bulk of sexual abuse cases stem from economically disadvantaged homes.¹¹ Where it is

customary to utilise the youngster to fulfil his daily needs. Parents often assume that their act of procreation entitles them to impose servitude on their children. Child sexual abuse is not solely committed by those from underprivileged backgrounds; it often transpires within middle-class and affluent homes. Disadvantaged and at-risk children become victims of adult exploiters who masquerade as benefactors while taking advantage of them.

In addition, research done by Amarathe and Vidanapathirana in Puttalam District in Sri Lanka showed that family dysfunctions have become a dominant factor for child sexual abuse. According to the study, mothers moving abroad for jobs, use of alcohol by parents, and separating parents were several causes of child sexual abuse.¹² A study done by Rojina Basnet and others explores the awareness among community and secondary school students in the Kathmandu district on child sexual abuse. The study indicates that students from both institutional and community schools possess a limited understanding of the repercussions of sexual abuse since only a small number of respondents identified all the consequences. Moreover, a disparity in knowledge levels existed between pupils from institutional and community schools.¹³

Statement of the Problem

The study's problem is the extent to which schoolchildren are aware of their right to bodily safety and how various factors such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status influence their understanding of this right.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to identify schoolchildren's awareness of their rights, specifically their understanding of their right to bodily safety.

Sub-objectives

1. To investigate children's level of knowledge and comprehension about their bodily autonomy and the safety measures they can take to protect themselves from harm
2. Analysing the impact of education on children's understanding of bodily safety
3. To identify the sources of information and influences on children's understanding of bodily safety

Significance of the Study

The significance of a study on the awareness of school children regarding children's rights, specifically the comprehension of their right to bodily security, resides in its capacity to aid in the creation of efficient strategies for empowering young individuals with the requisite knowledge and abilities to safeguard themselves from harm and mistreatment. This study can facilitate the identification of deficiencies in existing educational programmes and guide

the establishment of more extensive and suitable curricula that cater to the distinct requirements of children at various developmental stages. By examining the awareness of school children regarding their right to bodily safety, the study can provide valuable insights into how effectively children are being taught about their bodies, privacy, and consent. This knowledge can improve the quality of body safety education, ensuring that children are better equipped to recognise and respond to inappropriate behaviours or touch. The study's findings can also inform policy and legislative initiatives to protect children's rights and promote well-being. By highlighting the importance of bodily safety education and the need for more comprehensive and age-appropriate curricula, the study can help policymakers develop evidence-based strategies for ensuring the safety and protection of children.

Methodology

This study focuses on the awareness of children regarding children's rights: focusing on their understanding of the right to bodily safety. Upon examining the statistics, it has been determined that the number of child abuse cases has been reported to the police and NCPA Sri Lanka. This research will focus on students' awareness of the right to bodily safety. Accordingly, this study utilises a mixed-method approach to examine children's awareness of their rights, precisely their comprehension of the right to physical safety. Accordingly, a mixed-methods approach was used to gather data from a mixed group of 100 school students aged 15 to 16 years. Quantitative data collection involved the administration of structured surveys, whereas qualitative insights were acquired via focus group discussions and interviews to assess participants' comprehension. Accordingly, the sample was randomly selected from 100 schoolchildren from the Colombo Secretariat division. The study was conducted from January 2024 to May 2024.

Population (N)

N = School Children (Colombo Secretariat division)

Sample (n)

n = 100 (Randomly Selected) 50% Male/50% Female

Sample interval = n/N

(SF) = SF = n/N

The study was executed during a two-month duration, spanning from January 2023 to March 2024. The inclusion criteria were children aged 15 to 16 years who were enrolled in schools located in urban and suburban regions and who expressed a willingness to participate in the study, provided they had parental agreement. Exclusion criteria included children with cognitive or developmental disabilities that could impede their understanding or involvement in the study. The research included a systematic questionnaire

and focus group talks for data collection. Statistical analysis was performed with MS Excel, incorporating descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to discern trends and patterns. Parental or guardian informed consent was secured, and assent was acquired from the child participants. The research emphasized secrecy and the voluntary aspect of involvement.

This research underscores the significance of enhancing understanding regarding children's rights, hence aiding child protection and educational initiatives. It emphasizes the necessity for specific treatments to improve children's comprehension of their right to physical safety.

Results

The data was analysed using a simple percentage method. Figure 1 provides a detailed analysis.

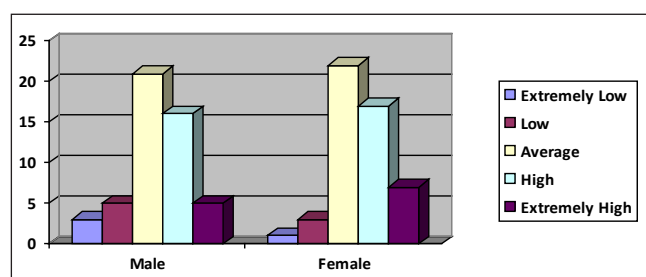


Figure 1. Level of Awareness among Male and Female Participants

The figure shows the awareness level of all male and female school students. It can be interpreted from the figure that only 10% of male and 14% of female students fall in the category of highly high awareness of the rights of bodily safety. It was also found that 32% of the male and 34% of the female have a high level of awareness, 42% of the male and 44% of the female were found average in the level of awareness of the right to bodily safety, 10% of the male and 6% of the female were low in their awareness towards bodily safety, 6% of the male and 2% female were reported extremely low. Thus, it is reflected here that most respondents are average in their awareness of child rights concerning the right to bodily safety, which is about 42% of males and 44% of females. 6% of male and 2% of female respondents reported deficient awareness of bodily safety. According to the collected data, female students are more aware of rights to bodily safety than males.

Furthermore, the study validated that children's understanding of the right to bodily safety differs according to societal context. The study found variations in awareness levels among students residing in rural, semi-urban, urban, slum, and shanties areas.

Figure 2 shows the awareness level of all the male and female school students according to their residential backgrounds. It can be understood from the figure that 16%

of male and female students from urban and semi-urban areas have an extremely high awareness of their right to bodily safety, and 12% of the students from rural and slums are highly aware of their right to bodily safety. It was also found that 32% of students from the semi-urban area are highly aware of their rights to bodily safety. Also, 28% of students from both urban and rural areas are highly vulnerable to the right of bodily safety. In addition, 24% of the students from slum areas are highly aware of their rights to bodily safety. According to the collected data, many students have an average awareness of their rights to bodily safety. Furthermore, 4% of the students from urban and semi-urban areas have a low understanding of their bodily safety. In addition, 8% of students from rural and 12% from slums have low awareness about the rights of bodily safety.

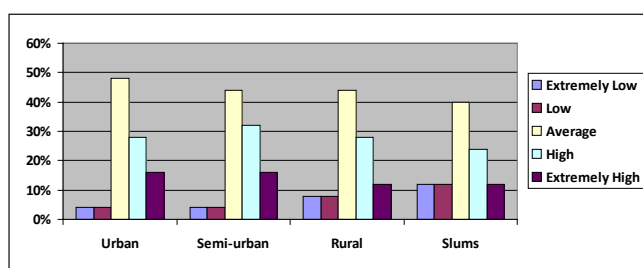


Figure 2. Awareness Level among Students According to Residence Area

Findings

The study found that most school students aged 15–16 years fall in the category of average in their awareness of child rights, with special reference to the right to bodily safety, which is about 42% of males and 44% of females. In addition, 10% of male students and 16% of female students reported extremely low awareness of child rights, with special reference to the right to bodily safety. Along with this, awareness levels among male and female students regarding the right to bodily safety are average. However, their awareness level has changed according to some conditions, such as residential areas, economic conditions, and familial conditions. One of the study's findings is that urban, semi-urban, and rural students have similar levels of awareness regarding their right to bodily safety. However, students living in slum areas show a slightly lower understanding of their right to bodily safety.^{8–10}

Discussion

Accordingly, the study revealed that both male students and female students have a comprehensive understanding of the right to bodily safety. However, it was evident that this differs slightly based on the socio-economic level and environmental circumstances of the households in which they live. Some children residing in slums and shanties exhibited a somewhat lower degree of awareness regarding

their entitlement to bodily safety compared to children residing in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Furthermore, it may be inferred that the familial upbringing of the children also influenced their level of knowledge regarding the right to bodily safety. The study found that certain students, whose parents had lower education levels and came from broken family situations, had a low understanding of their right to bodily safety. Furthermore, it was observed that certain male students had a low level of care regarding unwanted physical contact with their bodies. In addition, it was feasible to ascertain that there exists a limited understanding regarding inappropriate physical contact among some female and male individuals residing in slums and shanties. Furthermore, it was discovered that certain males of the same age exhibit indifference towards these unwelcome physical contacts. According to the study, approximately 54% of these students have been aware by both the school and their parents about their right to bodily safety. Additionally, 56% of individuals gained awareness through awareness programmes, social media, and other initiatives organised by institutions.

Conclusion

The study revealed that students from families with lower parental education levels and broken family structures demonstrated a limited understanding of their right to bodily safety. Parental education plays a vital role in shaping children's awareness of personal rights, as educated parents are more likely to impart knowledge on self-protection and boundaries. Broken family situations often result in emotional instability, lack of guidance, or inadequate communication, further hindering children's ability to grasp this fundamental right. Consequently, these socio-economic and familial challenges create a gap in awareness, leaving these students more vulnerable to potential threats and exploitation. Addressing these gaps is crucial.

This information implies that children are more aware of their right to physical security externally rather than in school. Due to this, the study suggests that children should be aware of their rights to bodily safety in school education. Also, every action an individual takes from birth until death is rooted in the learning process. Family can be considered the fundamental source of all learning so the child should be further informed about their rights within the family institution. Additionally, the study suggests ensuring that students receive recognition and support from trusted adults or peers, which is critical for their emotional and physical safety. This can be achieved through mentorship programmes, peer support networks, or other initiatives that promote positive relationships. Also, it can be suggested to provide ongoing training and support for teachers to effectively address issues related to bodily safety, including recognising and responding to

signs of abuse or neglect. This can help create a culture of safety and respect within schools. Furthermore, the study suggests engaging parents and guardians in discussions about bodily safety and involving them in school initiatives that promote student safety and well-being. This can help create a collaborative environment that supports students' safety and overall development.

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: None

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