Redefining Masculinity: The Struggle against Boys' Sexual Abuse

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Abstract: *India houses 40% of children in its total population but is ranked as the sixth most unsafe country for children. There is a need to explore the notions of gender, roles and responsibilities, peer pressure, sexual violence and masculinity among boys of varied age groups to build an understanding of sexual violence against boys and perspectives of masculinities.*
They face unique challenges, such as stigma and societal expectations around masculinity, which can hinder their willingness to disclose their experiences and seek help. The psychological and emotional impacts of sexual abuse on boys can be profound, leading to long-term effects such as anxiety, depression, and difficulties in relationships. Subramaniyam et al. (2017) did significant research on the silence of male child sexual abuse in India. The study discusses the general hospital received three referrals of male child abuse among the 27 referrals in 20 months. The main theme of the barrier was the misconception of the superiority of a male victim due to gender (patriarchy) and an expectation that he will outgrow the experience.
Effective prevention and intervention strategies are essential, emphasizing education, support systems, and public awareness to create a safe environment for all children. Addressing the specific needs of male victims is crucial in fostering recovery and promoting a culture of accountability and healing. The present study explores the notions of gender, peer pressure, sexuality and masculinity among boys and generates discussion on perspectives of masculinity and sexuality among boys.

Key Words: Masculinity, sexual violence amongst boys, stigma, psycho emotional impact.

1. INTRODUCTION:

According to WHO (2002) Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to provide informed consent, lacks the developmental maturity to consent, or is involved in activities that breach societal laws or norms. Child sexual abuse is characterized by interactions between a child and an adult or another child who, due to their age or development, holds a position of responsibility, trust, or power over the child, with the intention of fulfilling the needs of the other person. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Coercing or enticing a child to participate in illegal sexual activities.
- Exploiting a child for prostitution or other illegal sexual acts.
- Using children in pornographic performances or materials for exploitative purposes.

2. SEXUAL ABUSE AMONGST BOYS :

India has 40% of its population comprised of children, yet it is ranked as the sixth most insecure country for them. In 2007, the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare conducted a study to assess the extent of child abuse in India. The study revealed that 53.22% of children experienced one or more forms of sexual abuse, with 52.94% of the victims being boys and 47.06% being girls. Among the 69% physically abused in 13 sample states, 54.68% were boys and

88.6% were physically abused by parents. Sixty-five per cent of school-going children (Boys) reported facing corporal punishment; 50.2% of children worked all 7 days a week and they never reported the abuse to anyone. Children, especially **boys on the street, at work, and in institutional care** reported the highest incidence of sexual abuse. Although India has the lowest sex ratio in the world at 914:1000 and is the only country where prenatal sex determination is illegal and 48.4% of girls even now wish they were boys (WCD, GOI 2017) the **"patriarchal social structure"** of India has done little to protect the male children as revealed by the fact that the percentage of boys abused sexually are more than girls. The study indicates that they are more frequently physically abused by their parents, experience corporal punishment at school, are often left to survive on the streets, and are compelled to earn a living without any control over their income.

The word "patriarchy" literally means the rule of the father or the "patriarch," and originally, it was used to describe a specific type of "male-dominant" family. However, recently, it is used as a social, ideological construct that refers to the dominance of males and to the power relations that are hierarchical and unequal. Patriarchal ideas blur the distinction between sex and gender and assume that all socioeconomic and political distinctions between men and women are rooted in biology or anatomy (Heywood, 2012). To analyse the origin of patriarchy, most sociologists reject predominantly biological explanations of patriarchy and contend that social and cultural conditioning is primarily responsible for establishing male and female gender stereotypes. Patriarchy stems from sociological constructs that are transmitted from one generation to the next.

The patriarchal structure of Indian society has created distinct expectations for boys and girls. Boys are expected to embody "manliness," which means they should not cry or express complaints when they are mistreated. Many instances of corporal punishment are meted out to boys till they learn not to cry, and the abuser says that he has taught the boy to be a man. Although the patriarchy in India is heterogeneous, classified as Brahmanical, Dalit, and tribal patriarchies, they cut across family, religion, and caste, to control women's production, reproduction, and sexuality (Sanderson, 1990)

In any child protection service rendered by a non-governmental organization or hospital, utilization of services is more by girl victims than boys (Macionies and Plummer, 2012) so the iceberg phenomenon of child abuse, where we see merely the tip, in cases of male children is even more hidden, and perhaps, we do not even see the tip. The disclosure rate among boys seems to be lower and accidental disclosure becomes more of a rarity leading to years of abuse mentioned by Chakravart (2004) and Holmes and Waller (2008).

Sexual abuse is an abuse of power. When someone older, stronger or more experienced coerced the child into sexual activity, then the child is sexually abused. The abuser may win the trust and then violate by abusing. He or she intensifies the abuse by compelling the child to keep it hidden and instilling a sense of guilt. Sexual abuse encompasses more than just physical touching.

The abuser can force the child to watch sexual activity or pornography, this is also a form of sexual abuse. If someone continually invades the child's privacy - by watching the child shower or making sexualized comments about his body, this is also termed sexual abuse. The abuse has a lasting impact on the lives of the boys- they feel like "less of a man" or no longer have control over their bodies, feel on-edge, unable to relax, have difficulty sleeping, sense of blame or shame over not being able to stop the assault or abuse, withdrawal from relationships or friendships, increased sense of isolation, worrying about disclosing and fear of judgment or disbelief.

The present paper aims is to build understanding among boys about their values, beliefs, bodies, desires, relationships, gender and thoughts and feelings about all of these. Sexuality is made up of so many different components; the understanding of sexuality is ever-changing and unique to each person. The most important thing to understand about sexuality is that it is self-defined; that is, every person is allowed to talk about and understand their sexuality in their own way that makes sense to them.

3. SEXUALITY, SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND MASCULINITY

Sexuality is a significant aspect of our identity. It is about sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. Finding other people physically, sexually or emotionally attractive is part of sexuality. Sexuality is diverse

and personal, and it is an important part of who we are. Discovering own sexuality can be a very liberating, exciting and positive experience.

Most people are attracted to the opposite sex – boys who like girls, and women who like men, these are heterosexual beings. Some people are attracted to the same sex, these are homosexual. "Lesbian" is the term commonly used for individuals who identify as women and are attracted to the same sex. "Gay" is the most widely used term for those who identify as men and are attracted to the same sex. People who are attracted to both men and women, and are known as bisexuals.

Gavey (2013) says sexual violence is an umbrella term that refers to an inclusive category of sexual acts and experiences that are imposed, coerced, or forced onto a person. Rape, attempted rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual violation, and so on is all included. While some forms of sexual violence involve physical violence or force, not all forms do. The term also encompasses a broader range of acts related to sexual exploitation or degradation, including verbal sexual harassment. "Masculinity" describes the behaviors, social roles, and relationships of men within a specific society, along with the meanings assigned to them. The term masculinity stresses gender, unlike the *male*, which stresses biological sex (Kimmel and Bridges, 2011).

The socialization of masculine ideals starts at a young age and defines ideal masculinity as related to toughness, stoicism, heterosexism, self-sufficient attitudes and lack of emotional sensitivity (Wall & Kristjanson, 2005), and connectedness. Boys learn to be men from the men in their lives, from their own experiences navigating social norms, and from the large social and cultural context. Boys live under intensified pressure to display gender-appropriate behaviours according to the ideal male code.

Masculine ideals, including the suppression of emotional expression and the pressure to adhere to expectations of dominance and aggression, can increase the likelihood of boys participating in acts of violence including, bullying, assault, and/or physical and verbal aggression (Feder, Levant, & Dean, 2010).

Subramaniyam et al. (2017) did significant research on the silence of male child sexual abuse in India. This study aimed to explore the barriers to seeking supportive help by qualitative analysis of stakeholders of male victims of child abuse. Semistructured interviews and in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the topic of understanding the need for a support system for boys victims. The study discusses the general hospital received three referrals of male child abuse among the 27 referrals in 20 months. The primary issue was the misconception that a male victim is inherently superior because of his gender (patriarchy) and the belief that he will eventually overcome the experience. Douglas and Finkelhor (2005) concluded that cases of sexual abuse among boys are underreported due to the hidden nature of abusive as well as offensive practices.

"Men often hold in a lot of their feelings. This includes all the traumas and heartbreaking moments. Eventually, there has to be a release, and too often that is explosively." (Ron Blake, Social justice activist and Public speaker)

Unrealistic expectations are placed on boys and many feel they have to overcompensate or act in a certain way to meet these traditional standards, but we are all human. As human beings, we all possess a mix of both masculine and feminine traits, regardless of gender. Traditional societal views of masculinity harm every member of society, but studies show they have a greater impact on the self-image, relationships, and overall mental health of the man. Our society needs to remember that being a boy/man doesn't mean they have to like sports or girls. Being a strong boy doesn't mean you can't show weakness or cry. Being a successful man doesn't mean marrying or becoming a c-suite executive. Sexual preferences and gender identities, similar to career and lifestyle choices, do not reduce a boy's masculinity.

Hence, in nutshell, there is a need to explore the notions of gender, roles and responsibilities, peer pressure, sexual violence and masculinity among boys of varied age groups to build an understanding of sexual violence against boys and perspectives of masculinities.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS:

The recommendations given below are based on the discussion sessions with the boys and the interactions with important stakeholders around.

At Government Level

a. Revision of existing policies towards Gender Equality: Governmental policies and cultural practices simultaneously are influenced by, and shape social norms of masculinity. To break this cycle, policymakers and lawmakers should

evaluate legislation, cultural customs, and representations in leadership which reinforce a culture of male dominance. A key aspect of tailoring effective solutions includes government-funded research to examine cultural attitudes about gender roles, masculinity, violence, familial roles, and household responsibilities. Findings from national assessments and research ought to be made public. Legislators and policymakers should support the development of Programs and Centres for boys, like Men for Change in South Africa or the Men's Center in Osaka, Japan, which provide culturally relevant support for boys making positive changes through community engagement, health education, violence prevention, and fatherhood involvement. Likewise, much legislation provide 30 days of paid leave for all parents of new-born or adopted children, thus giving support for the development of strong families, which has found success in many countries and can be implemented here.

b. Expand Educational Programs: Students must learn how a culture of male dominance harms everyone in society, including boys and girls. The Government need to revise education programs with a focus on developing respectful communication skills, identifying and expressing complex emotions, as well as the ability to show empathy and compassion for others. The schools can implement educational programs that explicitly address gender roles, consent, bullying, prevention, and intervention. Training educators in diverse learning styles and gender bias is an important element of supporting gender equality throughout the educational curriculum, as outlined in the UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action. Teachers can implement strategies to address student gender bias, equal participation of boys and girls, gender-neutral language, and fair discipline methods. Give boys a chance to raise new topics and put questions like- "Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

At the Parents and Community Level

a. *A mother being impartial from the beginning always respects and loves her womb irrespective of whether it will turn out to be a boy or a girl.* Similarly, the life of our children should be free from the tangles of gender and related influences. They should be taught that it doesn't come always to a win or lose, but it is about enjoying the moment, having an experience, building relationships and developing gratitude towards life.

b. Parents must be involved actively in the boy's life this will make warning signs of child sexual abuse more obvious and help the child feel comfortable talking to the parent. **Show interest in their day-to-day lives,** asking them what they did during the day and who they did it with. Who did they sit with at lunchtime? What games did they play after school? Did they enjoy themselves? **Get to know the people in a child's life.** Be aware of who your child is interacting with, including both peers and adults. Asking a child about the other children they go to school with, the parents of their friends, and other people they may encounter, such as teammates or coaches. Talking about these people openly and asking will enhance the sense of care and protection among boys. When they know that their voice will be heard and taken seriously, it will give them the courage to speak up when something is not right. These conversations can be started as soon as they begin to talk about feelings or emotions. It's never too late to start these conversations.

c. **Teaching children about boundaries-** Let boys know that no one has the right to touch them inappropriately or make them feel uncomfortable. It is important to tell that their body is their own. Likewise, remind them, that they do not have the right to touch someone else if that person does not want to be touched. **Teach children how to talk about their bodies.** From an early age, teach the child the names of their body parts. Teaching a child these words gives them the ability to come to a parent when something is wrong. **Be available for them.** Set time aside to spend with a child where they have your undivided attention. Let the child know that they approach parents, if they have questions or if someone is talking to them in a way that makes them feel uncomfortable. Many perpetrators use secret-keeping or threats as a way of keeping children quiet about the abuse. Reminding the child frequently that they will not get in trouble for talking about the issue, no matter what they need to say. When they do come to a parent, follow through on this promise and avoid punishing them for speaking up.

d. Involve boys in Family Life- Parents should facilitate informed conversations about gender, healthy sexuality, consent, and violence prevention with children and other family members. Parents can encourage boys to express their gender identity genuinely, beginning at a young age. Parents can opt to introduce their children to positive representations of masculinity and gender equality through toys, books, and films. Fathers and male role models need to exhibit healthy expressions of masculinity by publicly acknowledging boys in a supportive and empowering environment.

e. Engage boys in communities- Community engagement is a powerful tool for creating social change, including raising awareness around masculinity. Individuals need to reflect on what masculinity means in their community and interrogate the origin of those ideas, including culture, media, faith traditions, education, and industry. Existing community leaders must be sensitised toward the issue and can further initiate public dialogue related to masculinity and gender with a focus on challenging toxic behaviours of masculinity, modelling positive examples of healthy masculinity, and illustrating how male dominance is harmful to everyone in society.

At the Individual (Boy) level

a. Boys should learn that emotions are healthy- when boys are instructed to "be a man", they become emotionless, tough, and secure, their innocence is stripped and unrealistic and unhealthy expectations are placed on them. They should be encouraged to express emotions and eliminate fear surrounding their identity. It starts with teaching boys to "not be men, but to be humans." This should not be a gender issue. When we address this as a human issue, toxic masculinity will diminish.

b. Boys must deal with anger- Though boys know anger is judged upon, bottling it up doesn't do anything, but we need to offer boys ways to deal with anger rather to bottle up. Specialists have recommended five sensations and counting when one feels angry or frustrated. Focus on five things you can hear, four things you can see, three things you can smell, two things you can touch, and one thing you can taste. This helps to get out of the head and enter into the body and tune into your environment.

c. **Escape from social media-** There is little escape from social media as an adolescent now. Their pictures in the public domain are not appropriate. This only makes it all the more important to embrace it within their lives. Boys need to understand and use it for the greater good.

A piece of recent news- A popular designer, Rohit Verma has opened up about facing sexual abuse at the hands of his uncle. In an interview, the Designer opened up about being raped by his real uncle during his childhood days. "he used to make me wear Saari, put hot wax on my body and do more horrific abusive acts.. all this went on for four years, I never told my parents about this because of fear"
Many celebrities have triggered conversations on sexual abuse, and they have started testing the waters. When a celebrity discloses an incident of sexual abuse with him/her, the number of people seeking support for the sexual abuse goes up. A celebrity disclosure serves three functions- it educates people, it inspires people and also serves activism. Hence, as a society, we need to redefine and reimagine child sexual abuse with optimistic masculinity.

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