

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VICTIMS OF ALLEGED SEXUAL OFFENCES ATTENDING THE DEPARTMENT OF FORENSIC MEDICINE, SYLHET MAG OSMANI MEDICAL COLLEGE, SYLHET, BANGLADESH

Dr. Kanta Deb¹, Dr. Siddhartha Shankar Dutta², Dr. Md. Tabibul Islam*², Dr. Tasnuva Aziz Monalisa³, Dr. Miftaul Jannat Chowdhury⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine, Sylhet Women's Medical College, Sylhet.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Dermatology and Venereology, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College, Sylhet.

³Lecturer, Department of Forensic Medicine, Sylhet Women's Medical College, Sylhet.

⁴Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmacology and Therapeutics, Sylhet Women's Medical College, Sylhet.

***Corresponding Author: Dr. Md. Tabibul Islam**

Assistant Professor, Department of Dermatology and Venereology, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College, Sylhet.

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study was carried out in the Department of Forensic Medicine, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College, Sylhet, Bangladesh during the period between January 2011 and December 2012 to see socio-demographic profile of the victims of alleged sexual violence. A total 250 victims of alleged sexual assault were brought by the police for medico-legal examinations were included. Majority of the victims belonged to the age group of 11-20 years (59.6%), mostly from lower socio-economic status (60.4%) and unmarried (58.4%). In 34.5% of cases had primary level of education and 24.8% of cases were illiterates. Student (29.2%) and housewife (28.4%) constituted most of the occupation of the victims. Most of the victims were Islam by religion (74.4%). Accused were single in 78.8% and were known to victim in 79.2% of cases. Incident occurred at isolated place (23.2%), accused house (22.0%) and victim's house (19.2%). In conclusion, unmarried young women of lower socio-economic status are the vulnerable group of alleged sexual assault. The majority of victims are literate and the assailants are known to each other. An understanding of the demography of sexual assault will help in proper attitude and handling of such cases.

KEYWORDS: Sexual assault, Female victims, Medico-Legal, Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Sex and sexuality are physiological phenomena in human beings. It is also a basic need for propagation of life. With the progress of civilization over ages, human society developed some norms to regulate the sexual behavior of its members to avoid conflicts and to establish peaceful and harmonious existence. Laws have been formulated to enforce this norms.^[1]

Sexual violence is recognized as a worldwide problem and is defined by the World Health Organization as "Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work, including sexual violence acts committed against men and women".^[2]

Sexual violence affects millions of women worldwide cutting across the cultural and religious barriers. It is estimated that one in five women will become victim of

sexual assault in her lifetime worldwide. It causes significant public health problem in both the developed and developing countries but is frequently under reported. The under reporting of cases of sexual assault is mainly due to social stigma, prejudice with regard to the chances of marriage. It is being considered promiscuous and responsible for incident, attendant humiliation and shame, embarrassment caused by appearance and cross examination in court. It has also risk of losing the love and respect of society, friends and that of her husband, if married.^[3]

No age is exempted from any kinds of sexual assault. Children are the common victims due to superstitious belief that sexually transmitted diseases may be cured by intercourse with a virgin. Younger a girl, greater the possibility of her being virgin.^[4] Global estimates from a large meta-analysis of 65 studies from 22 countries found that 19.7% of females faced sexual abuse before the age of 18 years.^[5] There is also a growing recognition of the prevalence of elder abuse;^[6] however, there is less information on sexual abuse within elderly populations.

Women and girls are consistently documented as having the highest estimates of sexual and gender-based violence.^[7]

Some of the risk factors for sexual assault include being young, consuming alcohol or drugs, previous history of sexual violence, students, having multiple sexual partners and poverty.^[8] Sexual violence could involve single or multiple perpetrators. One-third of the cases are presented to health care facilities had been gang rapes and the victims knew the perpetrators.^[9]

Sexual violence has a profound impact on the physical and mental health. It is associated with an increased sexual and reproductive health problem with immediate and long term consequences. It can also affect the social wellbeing of the victims as individuals may be stigmatized and ostracized by their families.^[1] But, there are little information about the socio-demographic status of victims of alleged sexual assault in our country. So, this study was conducted to find out the socio-demographic profile of the alleged sexual violence presented in the Department of Forensic Medicine, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study was carried out in the Department of Forensic Medicine, Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College during the period between January 2011 and December 2012. A total 250 victims of alleged history of sexual assault was brought by the police with a requisition and /or order from the legal authority for conduction of a medico-legal examination. The victim was identified by the police. A written informed consent for examination was taken from the victim or her legal guardian (if she was under 12 years of age, mentally unsound or unable to give consent for any other reason). Victims those who refused medical examination were excluded from the study.

The related data were collected from police investigation paper. The victim was then interviewed. Detail history was taken. Data were recorded in a pre-designed, semi-structured questionnaire which included the variable like age, religion, residential address, level of education, occupation, socio-economic status, marital status, type of family, site of incidence, time interval between incidence and medical examination, number of assailants and relationship with assailants. Physical and genital examinations were done and were recorded.

The interview was held in a peaceful, non-threatening environment.

Statistical Analysis: Data were analysed with the help of SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 20 version. Qualitative data were expressed as frequency and percentage.

RESULTS

The age of the victims ranged from 7 years to 49 years. The most vulnerable age group belonged to the age group of 11-20 years (59.6%) followed by 21-30 years (20.8%), 31-40 years (8.8%), 41-49 years (6.0%) and 7-10 years (4.8%) (Table I).

Table-I: Age distribution of victims (n=250).

Age	Frequency	Percentage
7-10 years	12	4.8
11-20 years	149	59.6
21-30 years	52	20.8
31-40 years	22	8.8
41-49 years.	15	6.0
Total	250	100.0

In 151 (60.4%) cases, the victims belonged to the lower class, 70 (28.0%) cases belonged to lower middle class and 29 (11.6%) came from upper middle class of socioeconomic status (Table-II).

Table-II: Distribution of victims by socio-economic status (n=250).

Socio-economic status	Frequency	Percentage
Lower	151	60.4
Lower Middle	70	28.0
Upper Middle	29	11.6
Total	250	100.0

The majority of the victims were unmarried (58.4%); while 82 (32.8%) victims were married (Table III).

Table-III: Distribution of victims by marital status (n=250).

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	82	32.8
Unmarried	146	58.4
Widow	15	6.0
Divorce	7	2.8
Total	250	100.0

In this study 86 (34.5%) females with allegations of sexual assault had primary level of education, followed by illiterates (24.8%), secondary level (20.4%), higher secondary level (11.6%) and graduate or above (8.8%) (Table-IV).

Table-IV: Distribution of victims by educational status (n=250).

Educational status	Frequency	Percentage
Illiterate	62	24.8
Primary	86	34.5
Secondary	51	20.4
Higher secondary	29	11.6
Graduate or above	22	8.8
Total	250	100.0

Student (29.2%) and housewife (28.4%) constituted most of the occupation of the victims (table-V).

Table-V: Distribution of victims by occupation (n=250).

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Student	73	29.2
Housewife	71	28.4
Sex worker	22	8.8
Tea garden worker	17	6.8
Maid servant	21	8.8
Aaya	5	2.0
Nurse	11	4.4
Garments worker	16	6.4
Others	14	5.6
Total	250	100.0

Most of the victims were Islam by religion (74.4%) and 22.0% of cases were Hindu by religion (Table-VI).

Table-VI: Distribution of victims by religion (n=250).

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Islam	186	74.4
Hindu	55	22.0
Others	9	3.6
Total	250	100.0

Most of victims belonged to rural area (68.4%) whereas while 79 (31.6%) victims were from urban area (Table VII).

Table-VII: Distribution of victims by social status (n=250).

Social status	Frequency	Percentage
Urban	79	31.6
Rural	171	68.4
Total	250	100.0

Type of family was joint in 137 (54.8%) and nuclear in 113 (45.3%) (Table-VIII).

Table-VIII: Distribution of victims by type of family (n=250).

Type of family	Frequency	Percentage
Nuclear	113	45.2
Joint	137	54.8
Total	250	100.0

In most of the cases (78.8%) accused were single and rest (21.2%) were 2 or more (Table-IX).

Table-IX: Distribution of victims by number of accused (n=250).

Number of accused	Frequency	Percentage
One	197	78.8
2 or more	53	21.2
Total	250	100.0

In 69.2% of cases the accused were relative or known to the victim and the accused were unknown to the victims in 30.8% of cases (Table-X).

Table-X: Distribution of victims by relation (n=250).

Relation to victims	Frequency	Percentage
Known	173	69.2
Not known	77	30.8
Total	250	100.0

Majority of victims were assaulted only once (53.6%). But there were 46.4% of victims who were assaulted many times (Table-XI).

Table-XI: Distribution of victims by numbers of episodes (n=250).

No. of episodes	Frequency	Percentage
Once	134	53.6
2 or more	116	46.4
Total	250	100.0

Highest number of the cases incidence took place at isolated place (23.2%), followed by accused house (22.0%), victim's house (19.2%) and rented accommodation (13.6%).

Table-XII: Distribution of victims by place of incident (n=250).

Place of incident	Frequency	Percentage
Victim's house	48	19.2
Accused house	55	22.0
Relative house	25	10.0
Isolated place	58	23.2
Rented accommodation	34	13.6
Hostel	21	8.4
Work place	9	3.6
Total	250	100.0

DISCUSSION

Sexual violence is ubiquitous; it occurs in every culture, at all levels of society and in every country of the world and can consider as a global problem. In this study the age of the victims ranged from 7 years to 49 years with most vulnerable age group belonged to the age group of 11-20 years (59.6%) followed by 21-30 years (20.8%), 31-40 years (8.8%), 41-49 years (6.0%) and 7-10 years (4.8%). Hence this study suggests that teenagers are more vulnerable age group for such offences. Similar results were observed in several studies.^[10-12] Younger age is more vulnerable to sexual assault may be due to the increase in sexual attractiveness.^[13]

In this study 60.4% of the victims belonged to the lower class, 28.0% of cases belonged to lower middle class and 11.6% of cases came from upper middle class of socioeconomic status. Several studies supported this finding.^[14,15] This may suggest that low socioeconomic status is an indicator of social disadvantage for females and may independently contribute to the risk of sexual abuse.^[14]

The majority of the victims in the present study were unmarried (58.4%) and 32.8% of victims were married.

Several studies indicated that female victims were predominately unmarried.^[1,16,17] This may be due to awareness and knowledge of married women about any sexual act leading them to take their caution. But Masho *et al.*^[18] reported that victims of sexual assault were mostly divorced, separated or widowed.

In this study 34.5% of females with allegations of sexual assault had primary level of education, followed by illiterates (24.8%), secondary level (20.4%), higher secondary level (11.6%) and graduate or above (8.8%). Nearly similar pattern of education of victims of sexual assault were reported in several studies.^[1,4] Lower levels of education (primary or none) in risk of violence against women compared to higher-educated women demonstrated in several studies.^[19,20]

In the current study student (29.2%) and housewife (28.4%) constituted most of the occupations of the victims. In this regard Das *et al.*^[1] observed that 23.8% of the victims were students, 20.6% were bar dancers and 19% of the respondents were commercial sex workers.

Most of the victims in this study were Islam by religion (74.4%) and 22.0% of cases were Hindu by religion. This result was supported by the study of Al-Azad *et al.*^[4] conducted in a Muslim dominant country. On the contrary Das *et al.*^[1] demonstrated Hindu in 52.4% and Muslim in 41.3% of cases which was conducted in a Hindu dominant country. This can be explained by geographic area of the study place with religion predominance of that area.

In the current study most of victims belonged to rural area (68.4%) and rest (31.6%) were from urban area. Several studies agreed this finding.^[21,22] But others disagreed this finding.^[1,16] The difference of rural and urban area in different studies might be due to difference in socio-cultural backgrounds in different areas. It also depends on the distribution of population in the study area and referral of cases from the periphery.

Type of family in this study was joint in 54.8% and nuclear in 45.3% of female victims of sexual assault. This result in contrast with the findings of Das *et al.*^[1] which reported 54% of victims were from nuclear family and 46% were from family. The difference may be due to in socio-cultural backgrounds and geographical locations of the study place.

In most of the cases (78.8%), accused were single and rest (21.2%) of the cases the accused were 2 or more. According to Riggs *et al.*^[23] the number of assailants was greater than one in 20% of cases. This result was also in accordance with several studies.^[16,24,25] But several other studies differed this finding.^[26,27]

In 69.2% of cases the accused were relative or known to the victim and in 30.8% of cases the accused were unknown to the victims. Several studies supported this

finding.^[23,24,28] But El-Din *et al.*^[29] reported 83.1% of cases the assailant was extrafamilial.

In most of the cases incidence took place at isolated place (23.2%), followed by accused house (22.0%), victim's house (19.2%) and rented accommodation (13.6%). Roychaudhury *et al.*^[30] found that the sexual assault occurred outside the house in most of the cases which was consistent with the present study. Arif *et al.*^[26] also reported commonest place of assault was isolated place in 82.7% of cases. But in some studies the incidences mostly occurred at alleged accused house,^[17,24] whereas other studies reported that most of incidences occurred at victim's house.^[31,32]

Limitation of the study, this study was conducted in single centre. So, these findings may not give us the exact pictures of victims of sexual assault in our country.

CONCLUSION

Unmarried young girls of lower socio-economic status are the vulnerable group of alleged sexual assault. The majority of victims are literate. Maximum sexual assaults are occurred in isolated place, the victim's or assailant house and assailants are known to each other. Therefore young unmarried girls especially from lower social strata and low level of education should receive special attention to protect them from heinous crime. Social awareness, sensitization and protection programs should be a high priority. Further study involving multicentre is warranted.

Author Contributions

Dr. Kanta Deb and Dr. Siddhartha Shankar Dutta conceptualization, methodology and data collection; drafted the article; Dr. Md. Tabibul Islam performed the statistical analysis and helped in drafting the manuscript; Dr. Tasnuva Aziz Monalisa and Dr. Miftaul Jannat Chowdhury critically reviewed the manuscript. All the authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript to be published.

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