

Study of the Cases of Sexual Assault; Reported at a Tertiary Care Hospital in Bahawalpur

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The present study was undertaken with objectives to study the socio-demographic and medico-legal characteristics in victims of sexual assault reporting for medico legal examination at tertiary care hospital at Bahawalpur.

Study Design: Observational / descriptive study

Place and Duration of Study: This study was carried out in the Department of Accident & Emergency of a tertiary care hospital at Bahawalpur from 1st January, 2013 to 31st December, 2014.

Materials and Methods: This study was conducted on 87 cases of sexual assault received in the Department of Accident & Emergency of Bahawal Victoria Hospital, Bahawalpur during the calendar years 2013 & 2014. The details pertaining to socio-demographic factors such as age, marital status, residential background, and profession of the victim, time interval between the incidence and medico-legal examination and associated physical / genital injuries sustained by the victims were also recorded. The results of the different specimens sent to the forensic science laboratory for further examination were collected & tabulated on a self designed Proforma.

Results: The study revealed that incidence of sexual assault was common in urban citizens as compared to the rural areas. The most vulnerable age group was 11-20 years involving 36(41.38%) cases followed by those belonging to 3rd decade of life involving 30(34.48%) victims. Of the total 87 cases of alleged sexual assault, 35(40.23%) were students whereas 55 (63.22%) were unmarried. As regard the time interval between sexual assault and examination, 20(22.99%) victims presented themselves for medico legal examination within 24 hours of the incidence. Hymen was found torn/ruptured with old tears in 72(82.76%) cases and fresh tear was noticed in 15(17.24%) victims whereas no Virgo intacta was found among all sexual assault cases. Vaginal swabs were found stained with spermatozoa in 56(64.36%) cases and on naked eye examination; the clothes of 22(25.29%) victims were stained with semen.

Conclusion: The most vulnerable age group affected by the sexual violence in Bahawalpur belonged to 11-20 years and majority unmarried. Rape & Sexual Assault is underreported crime due to social stigma. A joint effort by law enforcing agencies, Judiciary & civil society should be made in collaboration of electronic and print media to eliminate the sexual violence from the community. The study may help to enhance awareness among public and implement the strategies to make the society a safe place for females particularly the unmarried younger age group.

Key Words: Sexual Violence, Assault, Victims, Women, Medico-legal

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual Violence is primarily a crime of power and control. It can impact all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, race or economic status. The increasing trend of sexual violence against women has been incorporated in the Global statistics showing that at least one in every five women experiences rape or attempted rape during her lifetime¹.

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The incidence of rape and other forms of sexual violence is increasing Worldwide². Sexual offences are considered as a crime against women everywhere in the world and always been a part of human culture. The victims of sexual violence are not only robbed of their dignity and pride by way of seduction by men outside but may become a victim of cruelty by her saviors within the four walls of her own house³. This type of violence transgresses the boundaries of caste, creed, religion and prevalent in almost all societies. Sexual offences, when assume the form of sexual violence may lead to murder, suicide and acute depression and ultimately disturbs the social well being of the victim. They may be rejected by those close to them, ostracized by their communities and in extreme cases murdered by the perpetrator⁴.

Reported rape statistics vary from 1.19538 per 1,000 people in South Africa to 0.142172 per 1,000 people in United Kingdom⁵. The statistics for rape in USA are also alarming; according to a report, 1.8 million of the

22.3 million adolescents been sexually assaulted⁶. In India, sex crimes against women and girls are mainly manifested in the form of rape, molestation, sexual harassment, kidnapping and abduction for sexual purposes and trafficking of girls for sexual exploitation⁷. According to a US report on human right violation, rape is the fastest growing crime in India but still under-reported⁸. Sexual assault is a complex crime to analyze because many cases are never reported and no age is exempted from these crimes which are usually committed by males to fulfill their sexual desire, to show masculinity, to get control of the victim & to take revenge⁹.

The increasing crime scenario of sexual assault has proved to be a hazard to women's freedom and a menace for the law enforcement agencies¹⁰. The long lasting effects of mental trauma experienced by the victim may linger till the end of her life¹¹. It has been reported in the most recent international data that one in three women worldwide experiences physical or sexual violence by a partner or non-partner in their families¹². The highest number of sexual assault cases was officially reported as per 2014 statistics, in Delhi for the first time in history¹³.

Despite its pervasiveness and devastating impacts of sexual assault victims across the world, the responses of criminal justice system is problematic¹⁴. The purpose of this study was to ascertain sexual violence in Bahawalpur City and to analyze the data with respect to socio-demographic characteristics, medico legal examination and to evaluate the role of forensic examination in dealing with sexual assault cases.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in Accident & Emergency Department of a tertiary care health institution, Bahawal Victoria Hospital, Bahawalpur Pakistan. It was based on all the cases of alleged sexual assault in females reported for medico legal examination during the period from January, 2013 to December, 2014. The data was retrieved by examining the original record of medico-legal certificates, history narrated by the victims during examination, detail of injuries as mentioned in MLC registers and results of the specimens sent to Punjab Forensic Science Agency for further examination. The details pertaining to socio-demographic factors such as age, marital status, occupation, time interval between the incidence and medico legal examination and results of different specimens sent for chemical analysis & serological examination were entered on a self designed Performa. The data was then analyzed and discussed.

RESULTS

In the present study, 87 cases of sexual assault in females were examined during the calendar years

2013& 2014. Majority 58(66.67%) cases of sexual assault were urban citizens while 29(33.33%) victims belonged to the rural areas near the boundaries of Bahawalpur City. It was found that age of the victims ranged from 09 years old child to 49 years old women. The most vulnerable age group was 11-20 years involving (36) (41.38%) cases followed by 30 (34.48%) victims belonging to the 3rd decade of life. Fifty five (63.22%) victims of sexual assault were unmarried followed by 32 (36.78%) married. The majority 35(40.23%) victims were students followed by 20(22.99%) servants working under private capacity in the homes whereas 15 (17.24%) factory workers / private employees and 10 (11.50%) house wives also became the victim of sexual violence and no information was available in the record about occupation of 7 (8.04%) cases. [Table-1]

As regard interval between sexual assault & medico legal examination, 20(22.9%) victims reported for medico legal examination within 24 hours of the incidence followed by 32(36.73%) cases attending the medico legal clinic after 24-48 hours, 15 (17.24%) cases presented after 48-72 hours, 9 (10.34%) cases were examined after 72-96 hours, 7 (8.04%) after seven days and 4(4.08%) victims of sexual assault were medico legally examined two weeks after the incidence. [Table-2]

Table No.1: Socio-demographic profile of sexual assault cases

Category	Frequency	%age
Residential background:		
Rural	29	33.33%
Urban	58	66.67%
Total	87	100
Age group (in years):		
	Frequency	%age
0 – 10	5	5.75%
11 – 20	36	41.38%
21 – 30	30	34.48%
31 – 40	15	17.24%
41 – 50	01	1.15%
Total	87	100
Marital status:		
Unmarried	55	63.22%
Married	32	36.78%
Total	87	100
Occupation:		
Students	35	40.23%
Servants	20	22.99%
Employees in Private Sector	15	17.24%
Housewives	10	11.50%
Information not available	07	8.04%
Total	87	100

Thirty (34.48%) victims showed injuries either on genitalia or multiple parts of the body and out of those,

only 7(8.04%) had injuries on the Perineal areas without involving vulva / vagina but 15 (17.24%) cases had Injuries on the genitalia along with vulva / vagina. General injuries like bruises & abrasions were noted only in 8 (9.20%) cases but no injury was found on any part over the body of 57 (65.52%) cases.[Table-3]

On vaginal examination, hymen was found ruptured with old healed tears in 72(82.76%) cases and freshly torn with recent tears in 15(17.24%) cases. However, no case was found having intact hymen. [Table-4]

Table No.2: Time interval between sexual assault & examination.

Time Interval	No. of Cases	Percentage
Within 24 Hours	20	22.99%
24 – 48 Hours	32	36.78%
48 – 72 Hours	15	17.24%
72 – 96 Hours	09	10.34%
4 – 7 days	07	8.04%
7 – 14 days	04	4.60%

Table No.3: Associated injuries on the body of victims

Type of injury	Frequency	Percentage
General injuries	08	9.20%
Injuries on the Perineal areas	07	8.04%
Fresh injury on Vulva / Vagina	15	17.24%
No associated injury	57	65.52%
Total	87	100

Table No.4: Condition of Hymen in victims of Sexual Assault

Examination of Hymen	Frequency	Percentage
Hymen ruptured / old tear	72	82.76%
Hymen torn / recent tear	15	17.24%
Total	87	100

According to the reports of Forensic Science Laboratory, the spermatozoa were detected in 56(64.37%) cases on vaginal swabs indicating recent act of sexual intercourse. Twenty two (25.29%) cases were negative for semen whereas reports of 9 (10.34%) cases were not available in the record. [Figure-1]

Detection of Spermatozoa on Vaginal Swabs

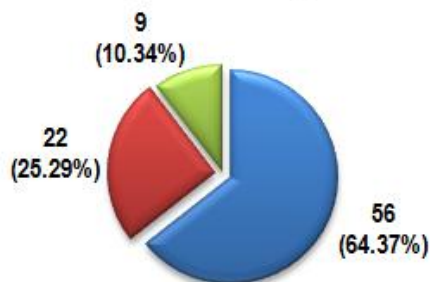


Figure No. 1: Status of the Reports of Forensic Science Lab:

While examining the clothes, stains were noted on the clothes of 22(25.29%) victims and no stain was seen in 33 (37.93%) cases whereas clothes were not presented at the time of medico legal examination in 30 (34.48%) cases. However, clothes were changed after the incidence in 2 (2.30%) cases only. [Figure-2]

Examination of Clothes

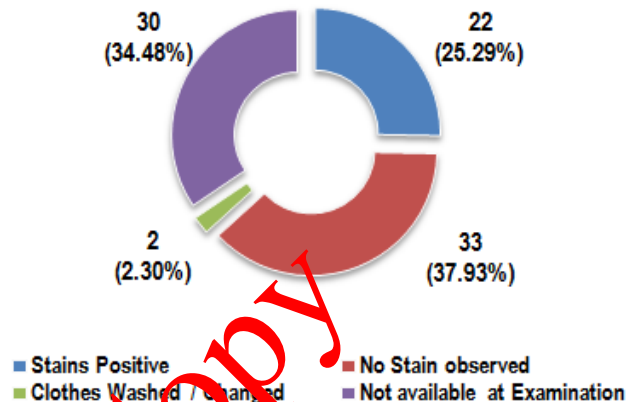


Figure No.2: Examination of clothes of Sexual Assault victims

DISCUSSION

Sexual violence against women is considered as one of the most common crime all over the world and violates our cultural and religious values. Cases of sexual violence could be higher in number because many victims do not report for the reason for being ashamed, embarrassed and afraid of being blamed by the friends, relatives & the society where they live ¹⁵. In our study, sexual assault was most commonly observed in young girls of age group of 11-20 years, majority of them being unmarried and students. These results are in agreement with the studies conducted by Tamuli et al⁴, Bhowmik and Chaliha¹⁰ and Bandyopadhyay et al¹⁵.

The most vulnerable age in our study, was 11-20 years in 36(41.38%) cases followed by 18-30 years in 30(34.48%) cases. The findings of this study are in agreement with those of Tailor et al¹⁶ showing majority of female victims in the age group of 14-17 years. Another study conducted by Demireva et al¹⁷ noted the involvement of 38.73% victims of sexual assault in the age group of 14-17. Similar finding have been reported in some other studies ^{18,19,20,21,26} indicating the 11-20 years as highly affected age in sexual assault cases. A study conducted by Bandyopadhyay et al¹⁵ reported that 36% victims below 18 years of age were involved in sexual violence. According to Tariq et al¹⁹ the highly vulnerable age group for sexual assault was 10-19 years whereas Suri and Sanjeeda²² commented that the age of 11-15 years was highly affected. Another local study conducted by Irum Suhail et al²³ revealed the involvement of 55.2% victims of age group 10 – 19

years in sexual assault. In view of the studies conducted in different jurisdictions, it can be concluded that no age is safe from sexual assault. This age group is more vulnerable to sexual assault due to the fact that the female adolescents are less mature and may not be able to protect themselves from either acquaintance persons or strangers.

The time duration between sexual act and medico legal examination is one of the most important factor to establish the case of sexual assault but majority of the victims were reluctant to report because of embarrassment, shame and feeling of guilt. In our study only 20 (22.99%) cases presented for medico legal examination within 24 hours of the sexual assault whereas 32(36.78%) cases reported on the next 24–48 hours. Similarly, 30.26% cases of alleged sexual assault were medico legally examined during initial 24 hours of the incidence as reported by Irum Suhail et al²³. This low reporting rate was also seen in a study conducted at Lahore²⁴ where only 4.8 % of the victims were examined within 24 hours. In a study conducted by Arif et al²¹ the medico legal examination was done in 24.3% victims of sexual assault on the second day of incidence and another study conducted by Haider et al⁹, documented that 37.93% victims were examined on second day of incidence while Pal et al²⁰ reported that 42.85% cases were examined on second day of the incidence. Kaushik N et al²⁷ reported only 7.48% victims examined on the same day of sexual assault and in our study 22.99% cases were examined within 24 hours of incidence. This delay may be due to various taboos and embarrassment of being exposed. Many victims do not report about the incidence for the reason that they are ashamed or afraid of being blamed²⁵. Unfortunately in our society such type of incidence is linked to family honors therefore the whole family is brought into making the decision of being exposed to law enforcing agencies.

Fifty five (63.22%) victims of sexual assault were unmarried followed by 32(36.78%) married. Almost similar findings have been reported by other studies^{4,15,19} in which 63% victims of sexual assault were unmarried. In a study conducted by Qasim AP et al²⁶ the authors reported the involvement of 65% unmarried victims in sexual assault. According to the study conducted by Pal et al²⁰ the unmarried victims were 77.14% while Irum Suhail et al²³ reported that 77.6% unmarried girls became victims of sexual violence whereas Suri and Sanjeeda²² reported that 96% victims of sexual assault in their study were unmarried. However, findings of our study are in contrast to those of Haider et al⁹ in a study conducted at Dera Ismail Khan, observing 41.4% victims unmarried as compared to 58.6 married. Majority 35(40.23%) victims in our study, were students. Almost similar findings were reported by other authors^{16,18,20}. Findings of our study

are consistent with Kaushik N et al²⁷ indicating involvement of 41.06% students in sexual assault.

On examination of Perineal areas, in our study, recent / fresh tears were found in hymen of 17.24% cases and old tears in 82.76% victims. Pal et al²⁰ found hymenal tear or rupture of hymen in 88.57% cases and hymen intact in 11.42 % cases. Bhowmik and Chaliha¹⁰ found hymen intact in 8.88% cases. Haider et al⁹ found old hymenal tear in 63.8% cases, recent tear in 32.8% cases. Arif et al²¹ observed old hymenal tear in 77.6% and fresh tear in 22.3% cases. Physical evidence of violence either on genitalia or other parts of the body were observed in 37(42.53%) victims in our study. Injuries on genitalia and vulva / vagina were noted in 22 (25.28%) cases extra genital injuries over the different parts of body were found on 8(9.20%) cases only. Pal et al²⁰ reported extra genital injuries in 20.0% victims whereas genital injuries were observed in 11.42% cases. Extra genital injuries were also noted by Arif et al²¹ in 10.8% victims. Evidence of Physical violence on the body was present in only 15% of the victims in study by Hassan et al²⁴ and the study conducted in Dhaka city by Al-Azad et al²⁸ revealed that 39.67% victims had genital injuries and 36.09% had extra genital injuries.

For the purpose of linking the case of sexual assault to the assailant, the detection of semen and spermatozoa is of utmost importance. In our study, Semen was detected on vaginal swabs in 56(64.37%) cases of sexual assault. This can be explained by the fact that the probability of detection of semen decreases as the interval between assault and medical examination increases. This is in agreement with study conducted by Arif et al²¹ who reported that swabs collected for semen detection were positive in 18.2% cases. Bandyopadhyay et al¹⁵ detected semen in 24.07% cases. Pal et al²⁰ reported semen positive in 22.85% cases. The chances of yielding positive result diminish if the victim had washed genitalia after the assault or washed or changed the clothes.

CONCLUSION

The physical violence against women is a significant public health problem as well as fundamental violation of women's human rights and is universally condemned. The accused of sexual assault are acquitted by the courts of law for want of adequate evidence but those should be identified and socially ostracized as these beasts are not worthy of being accepted in civilized society. The most vulnerable age group belonged to 11-20 years, unmarried girls. Sexual Assault is under reported crime due to social stigma. Delay in medical examination resulted in loss of vital trace evidence. Early reporting / examination of sexual assault victims are of vital importance to collect medical evidence enabling forensic science laboratory experts to ultimately help judiciary to punish the

criminals involved in such heinous crimes. A joint effort by law enforcing agencies, Judiciary & civil society should be made in collaboration of electronic and print media to eliminate the sexual violence from the society.

Conflict of Interest: The study has no conflict of interest to declare by any author.

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