

Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Educational Pathways of Children in Sri Lankan Tea Plantations

N. M. P. K. Kumari^{1*}, L. N. P. Wedikandage²¹University of Colombo, Western Province, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) and its secondary consequences significantly threaten educational participation in Sri Lanka's plantation sector. This research explores how these risks disrupt the education of children in marginalized communities, specifically focusing on the "identification-intervention gap" where institutional detection fails to provide sustained academic support. Using an institutional documentary research method, a review of records from the Kalawana Police Women and Child Protection Unit revealed that 99.9% of all formal child abuse and physical maltreatment complaints in the region originate from tea plantation environments. While general CSA data exist this article provides a context specific analysis of the identification intervention gap where institutional detection of abuse does not translate to sustained academic support leading to permanent school dropouts. In-depth interviews were conducted with five key participants, including child protection officers and experienced teachers. The interviews assisted in understanding the professional perspective regarding the gap between the identification of child abuse and the provision of effective long-term support for the child's educational recovery. Data were analyzed thematically. The findings focus on adolescent girls (ages 13–16) in the Kalawana plantation sector who, following the detection of abuse, faced critical disruptions during their secondary schooling years. The study concludes that legal protection methods are insufficient if they do not include academic stabilization. It recommends that plantation sector schools should change their approach to better recognize and respond to students' experiences of trauma by prioritizing emotional safety, understanding behavioral changes and adapting teaching practices to support healing as well as learning.

KEYWORDS

child sexual abuse, identification intervention gap, plantation sector, educational exclusion, Sri Lanka

Introduction

In the contemporary Sri Lankan landscape, Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a major problem as it is in many countries in the world today. It not only slows psychological development but also makes it difficult for a child to participate in formal education. When victims do not receive the support they need they are left to suffer in silence which can lead to academic failure and eventually dropping out of school particularly in marginalized communities. Empirical studies also show that estate sector children already experienced lower educational attainment and higher dropout rates compared to their urban and rural counterparts even in the absence of abuse (Karunakaran et al., 2019). The identification–intervention gap in this study refers to the gap between recognizing signs of trauma in children and providing proper support services. Although information about the general topic of child sexual abuse can be obtained the research follows the method of the specific problem approach by Bandaranayake et al. (2023).

The research looks at the gap of identification and intervention, which can be explained as the situation in which the child sexual abuse is identified by the school but the continuous intervention of academic support for the

child is lacking. This gap is examined using three main indicators like delay in response, misunderstanding by institutions and lack of action despite available resources. Delay in response refers to the time between when a student first shows signs of trauma such as frequent absenteeism or a sudden drop in reading ability and when the school or other authorities respond. Therefore, the school which should provide a protective environment for the child, becomes a school that discriminates against the child leading to the dropout of the child from school permanently. Studies show that the time between the start of abuse and when it is reported can take several years (Albers et al., 2019). Misunderstanding by institutions occurs when teachers misinterpret trauma-related behavior. For example, they may see these behaviors as laziness, lack of ability or disciplinary problems rather than signs of abuse. This often happens because teachers do not receive enough training to recognize signs of child maltreatment (Cicchetti & Toth, 2009; Roeders et al., 2024; Sinanan, 2011). Lack of action despite identification refers to situations where abuse is recognized but proper help is not provided. This can happen because there are no clear referral systems, because of language barriers or because plantation communities are socially and economically isolated (Lu et al., 2022). There is a well-established correlation between early childhood environment and adult health outcomes. Specifically, children subjected to neglect or abuse face heightened risks of developmental impairment and long-term physical and mental illness, ultimately narrowing their opportunities for success in later life (Fergusson et al., 2013).

In Sri Lanka plantation sector children represent one of the most vulnerable, under researched population where poverty, social exclusion and weak institutional support worsen the effects of abuse. In plantation schools where resources are already limited these misinterpretations often increase absenteeism and school dropouts particularly adolescent girls affected by abuse related stigma or pregnancy (Bell, 2023; Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). National data and empirical studies confirm a troubling rise in reported cases of child sexual abuse over recent years with plantation communities identified as particularly vulnerable (Bandaranayake et al., 2023). This research fills an important research gap by examining the impact of child sexual abuse on school engagement and educational outcomes for students in the disadvantaged estate regions of Kalawana. By examining this relatively understudied region of Sri Lanka, this research demonstrates how trauma and disadvantage can combine to irreparably derail a child's education.

The study was motivated by the high number of reported child sexual abuse cases in plantation communities and the clear pattern of academic failure, absenteeism and school dropouts among affected children. Research conducted in the estate sector reveals that a significant proportion of children experience abuse within familiar environments, often by known individuals while simultaneously facing poverty, low parental education and limited access to protective services (Hemapriya, 2024). Despite Sri Lanka's universal commitment to free education, systematic barriers restrict estate-sector children's access to schooling. When CSA occurs in such context its impact extends beyond individual trauma and seriously limit child's ability to stay engaged in the formal education. Victims frequently experiencing anxiety, depression,

difficulty concentrating and behavioral problems which schools are unable to address. Studies from various contexts indicate that children who experience sexual abuse often suffer from anxiety, depression, poor concentration and behavioral problems which leading to lower academic performance and reduced school engagement (Arslan, 2021; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011).

Without trauma informed educational practices and coordinated institutional support many children permanently disengaged from schooling. This research considers child sexual abuse as a complex issue that extends beyond child protection concerns. It is also an educational and institutional issue that can lead to long-term social and economic issues within disadvantaged communities. The problem is complex and multidimensional. CSA does not occur alone but is linked to poverty, low parental literacy, housing instability, cultural and social stigma and poor access to psycho social services. Empirical findings suggest that exposure to trauma in children is commonly misinterpreted as behavioral misconduct or poor academic performance, increasing the likelihood of punitive discipline rather than trauma-informed support (Arslan, 2021). This study clearly identified its research gap as the lack of empirical understanding of how CSA shapes educational pathways among estate sector children and how existing educational and institutional responses fail to support victims' continued participation in schooling.

Methods

This study used a qualitative case study method to understand how sexual abuse affects children's education in estate communities. It focuses on specific impacts of trauma, such as learning difficulties and loss of connection with school. Qualitative research is well suited because this research focused to understand complex, sensitive and context dependent experiences that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. Case study design allowed for rich contextual insights in to the ways linked to educational vulnerability in the plantation sector. It strengthened the credibility of the findings through extended engagement with the case. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share detailed personal experiences about educational disruption, psychological impacts and institutional responses. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns and meaning from participants' angle. Finally, these perspectives were grounded through contextual field observations within the plantation communities. These observations were essential for identifying the specific special and environmental barriers such as geographic isolation and infrastructure deficit that cause to educational exclusion of victims in estate sector.

This study was conducted because child sexual abuse cases are more common in estate communities and are linked to long-term learning problems. The research looks at how survivors often miss school regularly and finally drop out of education. The study only looks at tea estates in the Kalawana, Sri Lanka where people are more socially isolated and have less access to support services. It covers the period from 2021 to 2025 to understand how recent changes have affected child protection. Only Type 2 and Type 3 plantation schools are included, as these mainly serve children of estate workers. The study also includes people who have at least three years of experience living or working in this community, so the information gathered is

based on real and deep understanding.

Even though this research was based on the lives of child victims in Kalawana, it was not based on direct information from the children. Some information was also gathered through anonymous institutional documents. This helped the researchers to understand the real situation in the plantation area while avoiding the children from further harm or distress. To understand the impact of Child Sexual Abuse on education in detail, this study has included five important groups of people. Interviews were conducted with 10 parents/caregivers, 5 principals and teachers, 3 NCPA and Police officers, 7 Estate Medical and Welfare Officers and 10 community leaders to capture diverse perspectives on systemic challenges in the Kalawana estate ecosystem. Open ended question allowed participants to share their ideas in detail while study objectives consistently addressed. Each group has helped to understand a different aspect of the issue. The group of parents helped to understand how trauma and social stigma affect children, leading families to withdraw them from school and limiting their access to support.

The credibility of this study is ensured through methodological triangulation, using three data sources to check and confirm findings. First, in-depth interviews provide personal experiences and views on abuse and education. Second, document analysis is used to verify these claims with actual evidence. Third, field observations and researcher notes capture real conditions, like distance and access to services, which affect support. By combining these sources, the study provides a more reliable and complete understanding of the problem. The study ensures trustworthiness through several key methods. Member checking is used by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm accuracy. Peer debriefing with another researcher helps reduce bias and improve analysis. An audit trail is also maintained, including transcripts, codes and research notes to show how findings were developed. Together, these steps ensure that the results are accurate, transparent and based on real participant experiences.

Given the sensitive nature of sexual maltreatment and the inherent vulnerabilities within the estate-sector demographic, the research was conducted under a rigorous ethical framework. Prioritizing the 'do no harm' principle, specific safeguards were implemented to ensure participant anonymity, informed consent and psychological safety throughout the investigative process. The research was carried out according to international standards for studies involving people. Formal ethical clearance for this investigation was granted by the Institutional Ethical Review Committee (IERC) at the University of Colombo. The study was executed in strict accordance with the oversight protocols and safety mandates prescribed by this governing body.

Participation in this research was entirely voluntary and based on informed consent. Among adults, consent was sought through a written consent form after they had been fully informed of the purpose of the research. They were also assured that they could withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. To make the process clear and inclusive for the estate communities, all explanations and consent forms were given in local language. Researchers took special care to avoid causing emotional harm. Interviews were conducted in safe and private places chosen by the participants. If a participant became uncomfortable, the interview has stopped immediately. A referral system was also in place to connect participants with local counseling services or child protection officers if they needed support during or after the study.

The literature review was conducted by searching articles published in indexed journals using keywords such as child sexual abuse (CSA), educational pathways, plantation sector and academic performance (Alaggia et al., 2019). The reviewed studies provide strong evidence that child sexual abuse is associated with negative psychological and educational outcomes. Research carried out in different countries shows that trauma can affect brain functioning and disturb the nervous system, which reduces children's ability to concentrate, remember information, and engage effectively in learning activities (DePrince et al., 2009; Perry & Pollard, 1998).

Some studies further indicate that peer influences, particularly associations with delinquent peers, may increase the risk of involvement in sexual violence (Jewkes, 2012). In addition, mental health difficulties have been identified as important risk factors for childhood sexual victimization (Carlson et al., 2020). These difficulties can lead to social isolation, making children more vulnerable to being targeted and re-victimized by perpetrators (Assink et al., 2019; Cuevas et al., 2010).

Similarly, research in Sri Lanka has shown that child sexual abuse is common, often reported late and linked to negative psychological effects that impact children's participation in school (Dharmasiri, 2023). For example, a study conducted in a Colombo hospital found that many sexually abused children were not attending school and experienced psychological difficulties following the abuse, highlighting the connection between child sexual abuse and educational engagement in the Sri Lankan context (Rohanachandra et al., 2021). Other studies conducted in Sri Lanka revealed the association between family environment factors and socio-economic conditions, which contribute to child sexual abuse, thereby affecting the educational engagement of the child (Udayakumara & Niranjana, 2023). Moderating factors include family support, institutional response, and socio-economic conditions, which affect the educational engagement of the child.

Result and Discussion

Thematic analysis of interview data identified several primary themes.

Cognitive and educational impact of trauma

On the basis of reports from teachers and records from institutions, the stakeholders observed that "trauma-related cognitive disruptions such as memory and focus issues had an impact on learning and this was observed to have directly affected the learning in the classroom, and this suggests that the 'learning loss' identified was a reported perception and not an actual psychometric measurement". Trauma was found to seriously affect the brain, making it hard for children to pay attention and process information quickly. These difficulties with thinking and memory make learning in a regular classroom very challenging for survivors (DePrince et al., 2009; Perry & Pollard, 1998). As a result, students often appeared unfocused, forgot instructions or struggled to complete tasks and these difficulties were frequently misinterpreted by teachers as poor behavior or low academic ability rather than effects of trauma.

Structural and environmental barriers

Rigid documentation requirement created administrative exclusion, delayed school re-entry during a critical recovery period. These bureaucratic barriers reinforced absenteeism and weakened the child's sense of belonging, reducing the likelihood of successful reintegration (Gazeley, 2010; Tilleczek et al., 2011). Such delays often caused students

to fall behind academically making re-entry more stressful and increasing the risk of long-term disengagement from education (Lupien et al., 2009). Relocation to remote plantation housing further restricted access to schooling due to limited transport and infrastructure, reflecting broader patterns of spatial injustice and educational inequality. Displacement also eroded social support networks reducing peer connections and adult guidance, increasing vulnerability in an already marginalized estate context (Putnam, 2000).

Institutional and legal gaps

In this context, the 'lack of capacity' of the institution can be defined by the presence of a documented absence of counselors in the schools, high workloads of teachers that did not permit the monitoring of children's attendance individually and the absence of a formalized reintegration protocol for children coming back from legal or medical leaves. According to the stakeholders, the lack of capacity, together with the delay in the police-education referral mechanism, made the school not in a position to provide the necessary psychological or academic stability for the victims of abuse. Although schools functioned as early detection points, they have not the capacity for sustained psychological and academic support revealing a gap between identification and recovery (UNICEF, 2024). Support services within schools were often limited, overburdened or short term which meant that identified students did not receive continue follow up care. As a result, early identification rarely translated to in to meaningful long term educational or emotional support.

Teachers recognized physical risks but were insufficiently trained in trauma-informed pedagogy, limiting effective reintegration (Walkley & Cox, 2024). Many educators relied on disciplinary approaches that contributed exclusion rather than promoting healing and engagement. Judicial directives for re-enrollment were undermined by custodial instability, highlighting the limits of legal intervention without coordinated community support (Bell, 2023). Frequent changes in guardianship, housing or care arrangements disrupted school attendance and continuity.

Cumulative risk and long-term exclusion

Educational exclusion emerged not from a single factor but from the accumulation of trauma, institutional rigidity, environmental isolation, and early motherhood. Together, these interacting risks produced sustained disengagement from schooling, consistent with cumulative risk theory (Evans et al., 2024; Nadeem & Ahmed, 2024). Each risk on its own created challenges but when combined they made it much harder for students to participation in difficulties reduced motivation, confidence and opportunities to catch up academically. Students often felt disconnected from school and unsupported by both teachers and the community. It increases the risk of long-term absence or complete dropout. This shows how multiple disadvantages work together to combine to make it very hard for students to continue attending school.

In the Kalawana plantation sector, it is revealed by the synthesis of cumulative risk that, as children struggle with domestic responsibilities, custodial instability, and lack of institutional support structures, there is a total breakdown in school engagement, as revealed by case records of children moving from chronic absenteeism to dropout. The study explored how child sexual abuse affects education in the estate sector and found that educational exclusion results from the combined effects of trauma, institutional barriers and socio-economic disadvantages. In accordance with international studies, the results illustrate

the impact of trauma-related cognitive and emotional disturbances on children's ability to access schooling, even when physical attendance is maintained. This supports the argument that learning difficulties among abused children should be understood as neurodevelopment consequences of trauma rather than individual or motivational deficits (Jean-Thorn & Hébert, 2024). The results also resonate with Sri Lankan research on the psychological impact, late reporting and school disengagement among child sexual abused victims (Black et al., 2001). What is unique about this research is the focus on the impact of administrative inflexibility and geographical remoteness within the estate sector on educational vulnerability. The need for documentation and the inflexibility of the re-enrollment process acted as barriers during a time when the importance of continuous schooling was most valued reflecting international research on the bureaucratic barriers to accessing education.

Environmental and socioeconomic factors further disrupted education. Living in remote plantation areas and limited access to schools showing how spatial inequality affects marginalized communities (Soja, 2010). At the same time the erosion of social support networks reduced informal protection and advocacy for the child reinforcing findings that weakened social capital increases long term vulnerability and disengagement from education (Ptnam, 2000). In estate settings educational interruption was often normalized rather than treated as an urgent protection concern allowing abused related school withdrawal. At the institutional level the study found a gap between identifying abuse and providing ongoing support. Although schools and health services helped detect abuse a lack of trauma informed teaching and poor coordination limited long term educational recovery.

Recommendations For Future Research

Future research should build on this study by addressing the gaps found in the education and child protection systems. Long-term studies are needed to better understand how specific school and institutional support measures affect students' learning and resilience over time. Following affected children across several school years would help show whether efforts to bring them back into education are effective and lasting.

Future studies should also examine how specific teaching practices influence student retention. This includes trauma-informed classroom management and conflict resolution methods that are adapted to estate schools. Understanding how teachers' daily actions support or hinder students could explain why some children remain in school while others drop out. Expanding research beyond the Sabaragamuwa Province to include different regions and socio-economic settings would make the findings more useful for national education policy.

Conclusion

The study explored how child sexual abuse affects education in the estate sector. It found that trauma, weak institutional responses and socioeconomic conditions disrupt schooling and create ongoing educational disadvantages. Structural issues like geographic isolation and rigid school procedures worsen educational exclusion. To fill the identified gaps in the Kalawana plantation sector, the following evidence-based interventions are proposed to address the identified institutional barriers (1) to address the administrative rigidity, the Ministry of Education is advised to introduce a flexible re-entry mechanism that waives documentation processes for child victims (2) to

address the lack of specialized capacity, teacher training is necessary to address trauma-informed pedagogy and attendance monitoring to differentiate between trauma symptoms and behavioral misconduct and (3) to address the poor inter-agency coordination, it is proposed that a school-police/NCPA liaison mechanism is necessary to ensure that legal reporting is linked to a mandatory academic stabilization plan rather than just physical safety checks. From the cognitive point of view, the results showed that trauma related stress disrupted many mental processes. Children experienced constant alertness, difficulty managing emotions and reduced ability to focus plan and remember information. In the plantation setting ongoing housing instability and social stigma placed a heavy mental burden on the students. This burden used of the mental energy needed for learn in an academic progress. As a result, successful return to school depended not only on being re enrolled but also on whether teaching practices created emotional safety and helped student regain mental stability. Although the study is qualitative and context specific it offers important insights into an under researched group.

These finding highlight the urgent need for a Paradigm shift in how Child Protection is integrated into the Sri Lankan educational framework. When handled responsibly schools can help students recover from trauma. They can provide safe spaces where learners express their experiences and rebuild confidence in their academic abilities. Supportive feedback from teachers helps students regain trust in learning. This requires teachers to take an active role. Behavioral changes should be understood as signs of trauma, not as discipline problems. Without this support there is a risk that school dropout becomes accepted as normal for marginalized students.

Another important issue is unfair location. When children were moved the distance to schools was not considered. This separated them from teachers, friends and people supported them. Because of this going back to school became harder. Good communication between the National Child Protection Authority and the Ministry of Education was just as important as legal action. When these groups did not work together children did not get enough support. In the future child protection, school access, transport or digital support and understanding how children learn must be planned together especially in estate sector schools(Butler, 2013).

Author contributions

N. M. P. K. Kumari - As the main researcher, had the major responsibility for the entire research process. She developed the conceptual framework for the multiple-case study, which included the theoretical and ethical framework required for the study. Her contribution to the data collection process involved a rigorous triangulation of data sources, such as fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and a review of records from the Kalawana Police Women and Child Protection Unit. Moreover, she carried out the thematic analysis, interpreted the results in the context of the Sri Lankan estate, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Her contribution also included the organization of the large literature review and the management of the research data to ensure integrity and transparency. Finally, she oversaw the revision process, which included the incorporation of feedback to improve the clarity and scholarly value of the manuscript.

Dr. L. N. P. Wedikandage – as the co-author and supervisor, offered academic support throughout the research process. This support included assistance in the development of the research topic and objectives, analysis of the research design and methodology and suggestions for improvement of the overall quality of the research. Dr. Wedikandage also offered suggestions on the analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings to ensure that the conclusions were clear and well-supported by the evidence. In addition, the supervisor analyzed several drafts of the manuscript and offered suggestions for improvement of the organization, clarity and academic writing style. Dr. Wedikandage also ensured that the research adhered to appropriate research ethics and academic standards

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Conflict of interest

The authors state that there are no financial, personal or professional conflicts of interest that could inappropriately influence the research, authorship or publication of this manuscript. N. M. P. K. Kumari and Dr. L. N. P. Wedikandage state that the above research was carried out with complete intellectual freedom and that no external affiliations, whether commercial, governmental or

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