

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE ON WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: EVIDENCE FROM INDIA

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) on the educational outcomes of women in India. Using data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the study assesses whether exposure to CSA affects women's human capital formation. We employ OLS and Ordered Logistic regression to estimate the causal relationship, with the latter serving as a robustness check. The paper finds that CSA has significant adverse effects on education. Women exposed to CSA are approximately 8.7 percentage points more likely to have no formal education. However, they are about 4.5 and 5.7 percentage points less likely to attain secondary and higher education, respectively.

Keywords: *Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA), Education, Human Capital Formation, India, Ordered Logit.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a major global public health issue, with lasting effects that go beyond the immediate trauma and shape a child's long-term development (Henkhaus, 2022). Over half of all children globally suffer some form of violence, such as maltreatment, bullying, physical, emotional abuse as well as sexual violence (Choudhry *et. al.*, 2018). Violence against children is prevalent, but occurs behind the closed doors and is vastly underreported (Choudhry *et. al.*, 2018).

Sexual Violence against Children refers to, "Any deliberate, unwanted and non-essential act of a sexual nature, either completed or attempted, that is perpetrated against a child, including for exploitative purposes, and that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, pain or psychological suffering" (Kendall-Tackett *et.al.* 1993). *Sexual violence is categorized into contact sexual violence (including rape and sexual assault) and non-contact sexual violence (verbal or online abuse).* Childhood Sexual Abuse is one of the most widespread problem across the world which disproportionately affects women.

Globally, 650 million (or 1 in 5) girls and women alive today have been subjected to sexual violence as children. This includes more than 370 million (or 1 in 8) who have experienced rape or sexual assault in childhood. These staggering global figures highlights that childhood sexual abuse is not a rare occurrence but a systemic crisis demanding urgent attention.

In India, Childhood Sexual Abuse is similarly widespread; however, due to stigma and underreporting, its true scale remains difficult to establish. A study by the Ministry of Women and Child Development surveyed 12,000 children and found that 53% reported having faced sexual abuse, defined as "sexual assault, making the child fondle private parts, making the child exhibit private body parts, and being photographed in the nude," and most children did not report the incident to anyone (Chen *et. al.*, 2010). Literature shows that the prevalence of CSA ranged from 4% to 41% in studies conducted exclusively among young women below 18 years of age who were current students (Kingree, Thompson, & Kaslow, 1999).

Increased attention in the public discourse and activism around child protection led to the Government of India passing the, ‘The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO)’ law in 2012. This act criminalizes a range of acts including rape, harassment, and exploitation for pornography involving a child below 18 years of age and mandates the setting up of Special Courts to expedite trials of these offences. However, the issue of CSA remains a taboo in India.

The consequences of CSA extend far beyond the incident itself. Such experiences disrupt a child’s development trajectory and have lasting psychological and physical harm. CSA leads to anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Rossow & Lauritzen, 2001, Dube, 2001), suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Nelson, 2002, Klonsky & Moyer, 2008, Maniglio, 2009, Jennie, 2010), self-harm (Hardner *et. al.*, 2018, Boden *et.al.*, 2007) and other psychiatric disorders (Dube *et.al.*, 2001).

In fact, CSA also negatively affects the educational attainment of children (Mitchell *et.al.*, 2021, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, 2007). Though there is enough evidence linking CSA to poorer educational outcomes globally, research remains scarce in the Indian context, with most studies focusing on psychological consequences rather than educational impact. Therefore, this study examines the impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on educational attainment of women in India using NFHS-5 data. We use OLS and logistic regression to establish the relationship between CSA and education. The results indicate that CSA is associated with poorer educational outcomes.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data

The study uses NFHS-5 data, conducted

during 2019–21, to estimate the causal impact of CSA on the educational outcomes of women. The survey was implemented by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) under the stewardship of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) as part of the DHS Program. NFHS-5 surveyed 724,115 women aged 15-49 years and collected comprehensive information on a wide range of demographic, socioeconomic, and health-related characteristics.

It also includes a module on household relations, which covers information on physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. It also includes questions on whether a woman has been exposed to sexual abuse at any time in her life and at what age. We restrict our sample to 72,058 women who answered the sexual abuse module.

The dependent variable in this study is women’s educational attainment, measured as completed years of schooling. The key explanatory variable is childhood sexual abuse (CSA), constructed from the domestic violence module of NFHS-5. Following the survey definition, a woman is classified as having experienced CSA if she reports that she was subjected to sexual abuse before attaining 18 years of age. The analysis further includes a range of control variables, including interparental violence, childhood physical abuse, wealth index, caste, and rural residence.

Descriptives statistics are reported in Table 1. State fixed effects are also incorporated to account for regional heterogeneity. We also use religion fixed effects in our analysis to account for unobserved differences across religious groups that may influence women’s educational attainment, including variations in social norms, cultural practices, and access to educational opportunities.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (by CSA Exposure)

Variables	Full Sample		No CSA		CSA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Education	7.016	5.324	7.068	5.324	4.354	4.592
Age	32.643	8.566	32.624	8.570	33.633	8.310
Interparental Violence	0.183	0.387	0.179	0.384	0.379	0.485
Childhood Physical Abuse	0.054	0.225	0.052	0.221	0.158	0.365
Age at first cohabitation	18.963	4.041	19.009	4.043	16.879	3.379
Marital Status	0.998	0.657	0.992	0.647	1.341	0.981

Methodology

Ordinary Least Squares (with Fixed Effects)

The study estimates the association between childhood sexual abuse and women's educational attainment using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with fixed effects. Educational attainment is treated as a continuous outcome measured in completed years of schooling. The baseline specification is given as:

$$Education_{is} = \alpha + \beta_1 CSA_{is} + \Pi X_{is} + \varepsilon_{is}$$

Where Education is the outcome variable, representing education (in years) for woman i in states. CSA is dummy variable equal 1 if a woman i has been a victim of childhood sexual abuse before the age of 18 in state s and 0 otherwise. X is the vector of individual and household level control variables. The coefficient of interest, β_1 captures the average difference in educational attainment associated with childhood sexual abuse after controlling for observable characteristics.

Although OLS provides an estimate of the relationship between CSA and education, unobserved state-level factors, such as differences in educational policies, economic development, social norms, and institutional quality, may simultaneously influence both the likelihood of experiencing childhood sexual abuse and educational attainment. To account for such time-invariant state-specific heterogeneity, the study estimates a state fixed effects model while also controlling for religion fixed effects to capture unobserved differences across religious groups that may influence educational attainment.

$$Education_{is} = \alpha + \beta_1 CSA_{is} + \gamma_s + \delta_r + \Pi X_{is} + \varepsilon_{is} \quad (1)$$

Where γ_s denotes state fixed effects and δ_r denotes religion fixed effects. The vector of control variables includes, interparental violence, childhood physical abuse, wealth index, caste, and rural residence. Standard errors are clustered at the PSU level to account for potential within-PSU correlation in the error terms.

Ordered Logit

As a robustness check, the study also estimates an ordered logit model, using highest level of education as our dependent variable. In NFHS-5, the highest level of education completed is reported in ordered categories, ranging from no education to higher education. Ordered logit is an appropriate approach in this case because the categories have a natural ranking, but the distance between successive categories is not necessarily equal. Comparing the results from ordered logit model with baseline OLS estimates will help in assessing robustness of the findings.

The latent variable specification is expressed as:

$$Education_{is}^* = \alpha + \beta_1 CSA_{is} + \Pi X_{is} + \varepsilon_{is} \quad (2)$$

where $Education_{is}^*$ is an unobserved latent propensity for educational attainment of individual i in state s , CSA_{is} is a binary indicator of childhood sexual abuse, X_{is} is a vector of individual- and household-level control variables, and ε_{is} is a logistically distributed error term. The observed educational category is determined by threshold (cut-point) parameters such that:

$$Education_{is} = j \quad \text{if} \quad \mu_{j-1} < Education_{is}^* \leq \mu_j, \quad j=1,2,\dots,J \quad (3)$$

where μ_j represents the estimated cut-points separating successive educational categories, with $\mu_0 = -\infty$ and $\mu_J = +\infty$.

Under the logistic distribution assumption for ε_{is} , the probability of observing category j is given by: $P(Education_{is} = j | CSA_{is}, X_{is}) = \frac{\psi(\mu_j - \beta_1 CSA_{is} - \Pi X_{is})}{\sum_{j=1}^J \psi(\mu_j - \beta_1 CSA_{is} - \Pi X_{is})}$ (4)

where $\psi(\cdot)$ denotes the cumulative distribution function of the standard logistic distribution:

$$\psi(z) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-z}} \quad (5)$$

The ordered logit model thus estimates the probability that a woman attains a particular

level of education conditional on her experience of childhood sexual abuse and other observed characteristics. A negative coefficient on the CSA variable ($\beta_1 < 0$) indicates that women who experienced childhood sexual abuse have lower odds of attaining higher levels of education. Equivalently, the odds ratio for CSA can be expressed as e^{β_1} , which quantifies the proportional change in the odds of being in a higher versus lower educational category associated with a history of CSA. To facilitate interpretation, marginal effects are also computed to quantify the effect of childhood sexual abuse on the probability of belonging to each educational category:

$$\frac{\partial P(\text{Education}_{is}=j)}{\partial \text{CSA}_{is}} = [\varphi(\mu_{j-1} - \beta_1 \text{CSA}_{is} - \Pi X_{is}) - \varphi(\mu_j - \beta_1 \text{CSA}_{is} - \Pi X_{is})] \beta_1 \quad (6)$$

where $\varphi(\cdot)$ is the logistic probability density function.

The ordered logit specification includes the same set of control variables as the OLS model. State fixed effects are incorporated to account for unobserved regional heterogeneity, and robust standard errors are reported throughout.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents the OLS estimates of the impact of CSA on women's education. We find that exposure to childhood sexual abuse results in a decline in a woman's educational attainment. We use different models in which we progressively apply fixed effects to examine whether the decline in education is genuine or simply driven by the choice of the model.

We find that across all four models, our results remain consistent and negative. However, the magnitude of the effect differs. We find that if a woman is exposed to sexual abuse during childhood, her education declines by 2.7 years. However, after accounting for the control variables, we find that CSA exposure is associated with a decline in education by 1.6 years.

We further apply state fixed effects and religion fixed effects in Columns 3 and 4, respectively, where we find that after accounting for unobserved heterogeneity, the impact on education is still negative. This signifies that if a woman is exposed to sexual abuse during childhood, she tends to have lower educational attainment.

Table 2: Impact of CSA on education (OLS results)

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA)	-2.714*** (0.139)	-1.623*** (0.130)	-1.419*** (0.127)	-1.399*** (0.125)
Interparental Violence		-0.454*** (0.052)	-0.508*** (0.050)	-0.505*** (0.050)
Childhood Physical Abuse		0.543*** (0.087)	0.423*** (0.084)	0.450*** (0.082)
Wealth Index		1.774*** (0.018)	1.849*** (0.019)	1.833*** (0.019)
Schedule Caste		-1.156*** (0.070)	-1.022*** (0.068)	-1.254*** (0.067)
Schedule Tribe		-0.312*** (0.078)	-0.856*** (0.083)	-1.112*** (0.083)
Other Backward Class		-0.975*** (0.061)	-0.899*** (0.062)	-0.927*** (0.059)
Rural Region		-0.430*** (0.067)	-0.277*** (0.062)	-0.399*** (0.060)
Constant	7.068*** (0.034)	3.034*** (0.107)	2.771*** (0.104)	3.017*** (0.102)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Religion FE	No	No	No	Yes
Observations	72,058	66,219	66,219	66,218
R-squared	0.005	0.244	0.283	0.293

Notes: The table reports Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimates of the association between childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and women's years of education. The dependent variable is the total years of schooling completed. Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is defined as experiencing forced sexual intercourse before the age of 18 (coded as 1; 0 otherwise). Models 2–4 progressively control for interparental violence, childhood physical abuse, wealth index, caste, and rural residence. Model 3 additionally includes state fixed effects, while Model 4 further includes religion fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at PSU level and are reported in parentheses. ***, **, and * indicate statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

To verify our results, we also estimate an ordered logit model in which the highest level of education is used as the main dependent

variable. It has four categories: no education, primary education, secondary education, and higher education.

Table 3: Marginal Effects of CSA on Educational Attainment (Ordered Logit Estimates)

	No education	Primary	Secondary	Higher
CSA	0.087*** (0.009)	0.015*** (0.001)	-0.045*** (0.005)	-0.057*** (0.006)
Observations	66,219			
Pseudo R2	0.122			

Notes: The table reports Average Marginal Effects (AMEs) from an ordered logit model, where the dependent variable is women's highest educational attainment categorized as no education, primary, secondary, and higher education. The key independent variable is childhood sexual abuse (CSA), coded as one if the respondent experienced forced sexual intercourse before the age of 18, and zero otherwise. Standard errors are clustered at PSU level and are reported in parentheses. All specifications control for interparental violence, childhood physical abuse, wealth index, caste, and rural residence, religion, and state fixed effects. ***, **, and * denote statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

Tables 3 presents the marginal effects from the ordered logit model. We find that exposure to CSA reduces the likelihood of completing secondary and higher education by 4.5 and 5.7 percentage points, respectively. However, if a woman is exposed to CSA, the likelihood of having no education increases by 8.7 percentage points. And women who experienced CSA are 1.5 percentage points more likely to have only primary education than women who did not experience CSA or experienced after the age of 18.

These results show that women exposed to CSA are more likely to discontinue schooling at earlier stages and less likely to progress to secondary or higher education. Such experiences in childhood can have lasting effects on human capital formation and educational opportunities in adulthood.

CONCLUSION

The paper addressed the critical research problem of assessing the impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA) on education in India using data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5). The educational outcome was analysed using OLS as well as ordered logit model for robustness check. The findings provide strong evidence that CSA has a long-lasting adverse consequences for educational attainment. Women who experienced CSA are significantly more likely to have no formal education or only primary education. However, their likelihood of

completing secondary or higher education is substantially lower than that of women who were not exposed to CSA.

Literature suggests that CSA lead to psychological trauma, depression, anxiety, reduced cognitive functioning, and behavioural difficulties. This might interfere with learning and school participation. Victims may also experience school absenteeism, poor academic performance, or early school dropout due to stigma, family disruption, or concerns about safety. These barriers reduce the probability of progressing through the education system and ultimately diminish opportunities for acquiring higher levels of education.

The findings have important policy implications. While expanding access to schools remains important, policies should also focus on preventing CSA through stronger child protection mechanisms, effective implementation of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, school-based awareness programmes, and community interventions aimed at early identification of abuse. Also, victims of CSA should have access to counselling, educational support, and rehabilitation services to reduce the long-term impact of abuse on their educational trajectories. The study highlights that childhood sexual abuse is not only a violation of children's rights but also a major impediment to educational attainment and human capital formation.

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