

Child Abuse in Nagaland: A Qualitative Case Study of Forms, Drivers and Institutional Responses in Dimapur

Inatoli Shohe¹, Sapana Karam Devi²

¹ & ² Department of Sociology, School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Languages, Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, India

Abstract: Child abuse in Nagaland has received little research attention, even though rescue agencies in Dimapur continue to receive cases. This paper draws on three cases from institutional care homes in the district, involving children who were 13 to 15 years old when the abuse occurred. One boy had been placed in domestic work in exchange for schooling and was beaten over several months. A 15-year-old girl was raped by her brother after he drugged her food, and the abuse came to light only when a hospital examination found that she was pregnant. Five visually impaired girls were sexually harassed in a residential school by the man who ran it. The names used here are pseudonyms. The cases do not support a claim about how common abuse is in the state. They do show that the harm took place in settings meant to look after the child, that poverty, thin supervision, drug use and disability shaped the opportunity, and that Child Helpline, the police, hospitals and care homes acted after an outsider noticed. Recovery, at the time of interview, was incomplete.

Keywords: child abuse, case study, Dimapur, institutional care, Nagaland, disclosure

Introduction

Most of what is known about child abuse in India comes from national surveys and crime statistics. The Ministry of Women and Child Development's 2007 study, led by Loveleen Kacker, found that 53.22 per cent of the child respondents reported some form of sexual abuse, that about two in three reported physical abuse, and that about half reported emotional abuse. Boys were at risk as well as girls, and about 70 per cent of the abused children said they had told no one (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). Crime in India 2021 later recorded 53,874 cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, out of 1,49,404 crimes against children. Nagaland had the lowest count that year, 51 cases (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). A low police figure in a small state is not evidence that children are safe. It can just as easily mean that cases stay inside the family or the institution.

Nagaland is rarely present in that national picture. The state has sixteen recognised tribes, a strong customary life, and a Christian majority that took shape under the American Baptist mission. Dimapur, on the Assam border, is the main commercial town and the place to which village families send children for school or work. Dolly Kikon's account of sexual violence in Dimapur describes stigma, uneven policing, and a reluctance to

take domestic harm outside the community (Kikon, 2015). Her monograph is about women, not children, but the same pressures appear in the cases below. What is missing is a close account of how abuse of children actually proceeds in this town, who has access to the child, how long it continues, and what the rescue agencies do once someone calls.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative. Material came from three cases in institutional child-care homes in Dimapur, built from conversations with the children and with the officials and caretakers who had handled the rescue. The children were between 13 and 15 at the time of the abuse. Because the subject is difficult to ask about directly, the conversations were informal and followed the child's account rather than a fixed schedule. Official interviews used a short topic guide, beginning with a general account of how the home received the case.

The names in this paper are not the real names. Ashi, Uncle Mino, Fizo, Loly and Suly are pseudonyms used so that the children cannot be identified and are not put at further risk. The hotel, the school and the care homes are also unnamed. Dimapur and Child Helpline are retained because they belong to the rescue process.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was issued by Lovely Professional University, Phagwara through its institutional ethics committee before the fieldwork began. Consent was taken from the institution that held guardianship. The abuser was not approached. Rapport mattered. The boy in the first case was unwilling to speak until the reason for the conversation had been explained. Sensitive detail often came late in the sitting, not at the start.

The cases were selected because the homes could provide both a child who was willing to talk and a staff member who knew the file. They are not a sample of abuse in Nagaland. They are cases that reached a helpline and were still in care when the fieldwork was done.

Theoretical Framework

Merton's account of strain describes the gap between a valued goal and a blocked route to it (Merton, 1938). In the first case the valued goal was schooling. The parents could not pay and the child was sent to an employer on the promise of education. The abuse began after that exchange. Strain here is not a general theory of deviant parents. It is a description of the bargain that moved the child out of the village.

The second idea is simply about access. Finkelhor's review of child sexual abuse found that the offender is usually someone the child knows (Finkelhor, 1994). Bajpai makes the same point for India: neighbours, relatives and teachers account for most recorded sexual offences against children (Bajpai, 2018). The Dimapur cases extend that point beyond sexual abuse. The boy was beaten by the man who had been given charge of him. The known adult is not a failure of guardianship from outside. He is the guardian.

Poverty remains part of the picture. Berger's work on income and physical violence and the longer literature on material hardship and placement warn against treating abuse as a private moral failure (Berger, 2005). In these interviews the hardship is specific: school fees that could not be paid, parents working as labourers in the village, low-income families whose daughters were boarders. Conflict history and customary discipline are part of the setting of Nagaland. They are not what these children described and they are not treated as findings.

Functionalist writing from Durkheim onward, treats the family as one of the institutions that holds everyday conduct in place. When that hold loosens, Durkheim's term is anomie: norms no longer regulate behaviour as they once did (Durkheim, 1897/1951). Applied carefully, the point is not that Naga custom has collapsed. It is that the adults who would once have watched a child: parents, grandparents, neighbours were not in a position to do so. Foster care, social work and rescue homes are the formal answer functionalists expect from the legal and welfare system (Parsons, 1951). The criticism of that view is fair and these cases support it. Removing a child restores a kind of order. It does not, by itself, deal with the fear left behind.

Conflict theory reads abuse as a relation of power, not only as a family failing. Marx's account of material pressure is relevant only at one remove: households short of money have fewer ways of refusing a bad arrangement (Marx, 1867). Collins and later writers on family violence add that the weaker person in the household, often the child, absorbs that pressure (Collins, 1975). Pelton's work on material hardship and placement makes the same argument from child-welfare research: poverty does not cause every beating, but it narrows the exits (Pelton, 1994). In Dimapur the power was concrete. An employer-controlled food, sleep and school. A brother controlled the night in a shared room. A proprietor-controlled marks and the hostel.

Feminist work ties sexual abuse to patriarchal authority and to the cost of speaking (Connell, 2002). Girls in particular are told that disclosure will bring shame on the house. That claim travels poorly if it is used to explain the boy's beating, which was not sexual. It fits Fizo's silence, and it fits the proprietor's threat that the girls would not be believed. Intersectional arguments about caste do not map neatly onto Naga society, where tribe, poverty and disability did the sorting. Disability, in the third case, worked as caste is sometimes said to work elsewhere, it made the children dependent on the institution, and easy to disbelieve.

Indian law has already named the problem. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, give the police and the Child Welfare Committee a route once a case is reported. The 2007 national study remains the clearest evidence that reporting does not follow harm: most children told no one (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). Strain theory is the link between that legal picture and the first case. Schooling is the approved aim. When the family cannot pay, the child is placed where the aim is promised and the supervision is private (Merton, 1938).

Naga social life is the setting, not a cause that can be read off the interviews. Village authority, kinship obligation and, for boys in an earlier generation, the morung were forms of collective watching. Christianity, schooling and movement into towns such as Dimapur and Kohima have thinned that watching without replacing it with an equivalent. Kikon's Dimapur study describes the result for women: stigma, uneven policing, and a preference for keeping sexual harm inside the community (Kikon, 2015). The child cases sit in the same town, with a further twist. The child had often been sent there by the family, for school or for work, and the person at the other end of that journey was the abuser.

Risk Factors and Classification of Child Abuse

The cases use four ordinary categories, and it is worth stating them before the narratives because the files do not keep them apart.

Physical abuse is the deliberate use of force that injures or is likely to injure. In the boy's account this was a belt, a bamboo stick, a blow to the face and his head struck against a wall, repeated over six or seven months. It was also exhaustion: work from about 4 a.m., school after that and punishment if the employer was not satisfied. Leeb and colleagues, writing for public-health surveillance, treat this pattern as maltreatment whether or not a bone is broken (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon and Arias, 2008).

Sexual abuse is a sexual act imposed on a child, including rape and harassment by a person with authority. Fizo was drugged and raped by her brother, the five girls were harassed in their hostel by the proprietor, who used their visual impairment. Both fit the POCSO frame of a sexual offence by a person the child knows. The national survey found the same structure: persons in trust were major abusers and sexual abuse was reported by girls and by boys (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007).

Emotional abuse is harder to separate because it connects with physical and sexual abuse. The boy was ashamed of his scars and afraid of being left alone. Fizo described a bond she still could not believe had been false. The girls were told they would fail and that they would not be believed and they had admired the man who said it. Norman and colleagues' review link this cluster "fear, low trust, difficulty at school" to physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect over the longer term (Norman et al., 2012).

Neglect, in these files, is an omission. Grandparents who no longer asked where a boy of 19 had been. Parents who sent a child away because fees could not be paid and then had no contact. A hostel in which no adult stopped the proprietor entering the girls' room. Caregiver substance use is a known companion of this omission (Berger, 2005). Here the substance use was the brother's, not a parent, and it was used directly: drugs in Fizo's food.

The Cases

Case 1: A boy of 13, physical abuse and domestic work

In August 2023 Child Helpline Dimapur received a call from a man who said a boy in his neighbourhood was being mistreated by his employer. Staff went with the police. The employer owned a hotel and had taken the boy for domestic work in return for schooling. Ashi, a staff member who was present, described the condition in which they found him.

“The boy, who was about 13, was in a very bad condition. His body was covered with scars and fresh injuries. They took him to the nearest hospital. He was confused and crying, and he wanted to go home. There were no internal injuries, but he had been beaten for about six or seven months.”

In the care home he was reluctant to talk. He said he had not wanted to leave home. His parents were poor and could not pay for school, so a cousin brought him to Dimapur and left him with Uncle Mino. After about a month the beatings started, with a belt or a bamboo stick. He remembered being punched in the face and having his head struck against a wall because the employer's son's uniform had not been washed properly. His eyes were swollen the next morning. Work began around 4 a.m.: rooms, kitchen, the area outside, then breakfast for the family. School came after that, if the employer was satisfied. He was often asleep in class. At about 2 p.m. he was back at work until 7. On the evening of the rescue he had been hit for leaving the dishes, then sent to buy vegetables. A neighbour stopped him because the scars were visible. He ran. The neighbour called the helpline anyway.

A year later he was still in the home. Some scars remained. He did not like to be left alone and he was afraid of meeting Uncle Mino. Counselling was continuing.

Case 2: Fizo, 15, sexual abuse by her brother

Fizo had lived with her grandparents and her brother in Dimapur since she was six. Her parents stayed in the village and worked as labourers. She was in Class 9. Her brother had dropped out and was using drugs. He came home late, or after two or three days, and the grandparents, who were old, did not question him. The house was small. The grandparents slept on the bed; Fizo and her brother slept on the floor.

One evening he put drugs in her food. She slept heavily. After the grandparents were asleep, he raped her. She had pained the next day and did not connect it with what had happened. The case opened only when severe stomach pain took her to hospital and the doctor found that she was two months pregnant. Police investigated and the Child Welfare Committee took her. Her brother, then 19, was imprisoned. She stayed in a care home, received counselling and medical care, and later gave birth to a girl who was given for adoption with her consent and that of the family.

“Everything happened in a blink. It still leaves me in pain. It tore my family in two. I still cannot believe that the bond I had with my brother is gone.”

She was back in school at the time of interview, with counselling once a week. She said she was anxious and that she found it hard to trust people, especially men.

Case 3: Five visually impaired girls, 13 and 14

In 2022 Child Helpline Dimapur was called by students who had heard five visually impaired girls asking for help. The girls were boarders in a school for the blind. Staff found them frightened. They said the proprietor had come into their room more than once and sexually harassed them, using the fact that they could not see him. He told them they would fail their examinations if they spoke, and that nobody would believe them. They called out only when they heard people passing the building. He was later arrested and the school was closed.

Loly: "I never thought my own sir would do this. We admired him because he was kind to us. Now I feel sick when I think of it."

Suly: "I regret that I did not react sooner. I was scared. I want to punch him now."

Both girls were from low-income families and were still in a care home, with the home paying for their schooling. They distrusted new people. Loly's word for the perpetrator was still "sir".

Discussion and findings

Three cases are not a measure of how widespread abuse is in Nagaland. What they show is how the harm was arranged in incidents that reached Child Helpline Dimapur in 2022 and 2023.

The forms overlapped. The boy was beaten, but he was also a domestic worker, woken at 4 a.m. and punished when the work was not good enough. Fizo was drugged, raped, and then pregnant. The girls were harassed and threatened with failure. In each case an adult who should have noticed did not: grandparents who no longer asked where the brother had been, parents who had handed the child to a cousin, hostel staff who did not stop the proprietor entering the room. The injury was the assault and the absence around it.

None of this happened in a public place. The boy was beaten in the hotel under an arrangement his cousin had made. Fizo was raped in the room she shared with her grandparents. The girls were harassed in their own hostel by the man they called sir. Finkelhor's point about known offenders fits the sexual cases; the boy's case shows the same structure in physical abuse (Finkelhor, 1994). The children stayed because leaving was not available. The boy had no family contact and did not know Dimapur. Fizo was asleep, and the adults in the house were old. The girls could not see who came in, and their marks depended on the man who threatened them.

The drivers that can be read from the interviews are ordinary and concrete. Schooling was the reason the boy was sent away and the household could not pay for it. That is strain in Merton's limited sense: the approved route was blocked and another route was accepted (Merton, 1938). Fizo's parents had remained in the village since she was six. Supervision was already thin, and her brother's drug use widened the gap. Disability did

the equivalent work in the third case. Visual impairment made exit hard and academic authority was used to keep the girls quiet. Customary law and the history of conflict were not part of these accounts. To list them as causes would go beyond the interviews.

Disclosure came from outside. A neighbour saw scars and the boy still ran. A doctor found a pregnancy. Passers-by heard the girls. The 2007 national study found that most abused children tell no one (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007). These cases suggest why. The boy was ashamed of the scars at school. The girls had been told they would not be believed. Fizo did not, at first, name what had been done to her. Silence here is dependence and threat, not a tribal rule.

Schooling was not a protection. It was the promise that moved the boy, the class Fizo was in when the rape began, and the threat the proprietor used. Dimapur was the destination, not just the site of rescue. Children had been sent there, away from parents, and placed with the person who later harmed them. Duration matters as well. Six or seven months of beatings and harassment more than once. The children knew something was wrong before any office did but they did not have a way out.

The aftermaths differ and should not be folded into one phrase about trauma. Fizo gave birth and the infant was adopted. She described a family split in two. The boy still had scars and did not want to be alone. Loly and Suly had moved from admiration to disgust. What the three accounts share is narrower. The care home was where the story could be told, and telling it had not, by the interview, made the fear go away. That pattern is consistent with the longer health literature on abuse (Felitti et al., 1998; Norman et al., 2012). It is also a local limit: counselling had started and family restoration had not.

Institutional response

In all three cases the formal system started only after an outsider noticed. Nobody was found through a visit to a workplace, a hostel inspection, or a family that came forward. Once the call was made, removal was quick. Child Helpline and the police took the children out, and a hospital examined them.

The hospital did two kinds of work. In the boy's case it recorded six or seven months of injury and found no internal harm, which gave the rescue a file. In Fizo's case the doctor, not the family, established the pregnancy and brought in the police and the Child Welfare Committee. For abuse inside a house, the hospital was the point at which the secret became a case.

After that, the legal steps were real. Fizo's brother was imprisoned. The proprietor was arrested and the school closed. The infant was placed for adoption after consent. POCSO and the juvenile justice law were not only texts in these files. What the files do not show is early detection. Threats of exam failure and the claim that no one would believe a child, were enough to hold the girls silent. The boy's ignorance of the town did the same work.

Longer care sat with the NGO homes. Shelter, school fees for the poorer children and counselling were in place. A year on, the boy still feared the employer. Fizo still found men hard to trust. Loly and Suly still hesitated with new people. Open shelters are meant, in the scheme, to move children back to family where that is safe. These three cases had not reached that point. The chain works when someone outside the relationship is willing to call. It is weak where the supervisor is the abuser, and it is weaker on recovery than on rescue.

Conclusion

The Dimapur cases are a small record, and they should stay small in the claims made from them. They show abuse by an employer, a brother and a school proprietor, continuing for weeks or months, and ending because a neighbour, a doctor or a passer-by acted. Poverty and the search for schooling moved children into those arrangements. Drug use and disability made supervision fail. The helpline, the police, the hospital and the care home could respond once a case existed. They had no part in the months before it existed.

A next study would need more than three files and it would need the homes that refused access as well as those that allowed it. For now, the practical implication is narrow enough to state. Children placed in domestic work and children boarding in special schools in Dimapur are not being seen until the injury is already old. Inspection of those arrangements and counselling that continues after the emergency placement, are the gaps these cases actually support.

References

- Bajpai, A. (2018). *Child rights in India: Law, policy, and practice* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Berger, L. M. (2005). Income, family characteristics, and physical violence toward children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29(2), 107–133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2004.02.006>
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245–258. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8)
- Finkelhor, D. (1994). Current information on the scope and nature of child sexual abuse. *The Future of Children*, 4(2), 31–53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602522>
- Kikon, D. (2015). *Life and dignity: Women's testimonies of sexual violence in Dimapur (Nagaland)*. North Eastern Social Research Centre.
- Merton, R. K. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), 672–682. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686>

- Ministry of Women and Child Development. (2007). Study on child abuse: India 2007. Government of India. <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=26737>
- National Crime Records Bureau. (2022). Crime in India 2021. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
- Norman, R. E., Byambaa, M., De, R., Butchart, A., Scott, J., & Vos, T. (2012). The long-term health consequences of child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS Medicine*, 9(11), e1001349. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001349>
- Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012.
- Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.
- Collins, R. (1975). *Conflict sociology: Toward an explanatory science*. Academic Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2002). *Gender*. Polity Press.
- Coulton, C. J., Crampton, D. S., Korbin, J. E., Spilsbury, J. C., & Irwin, M. (2007). How neighborhoods influence child maltreatment: A review of the literature and alternative pathways. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 31(11–12), 1117–1142.
- Dixon, L., Browne, K., & Hamilton-Giachritsis, C. (2005). Risk factors of parents abused as children: A mediational analysis of the intergenerational continuity of child maltreatment (Part I). *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 46(1), 47–57.
- Durkheim, E. (1897/1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. Free Press.
- Leeb, R. T., Paulozzi, L., Melanson, C., Simon, T., & Arias, I. (2008). Child maltreatment surveillance: Uniform definitions for public health and recommended data elements. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Marx, K. (1867/1976). *Capital: A critique of political economy*, Volume 1. Penguin.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.
- Pelton, L. H. (1994). The role of material factors in child abuse and neglect. In G. B. Melton & F. D. Barry (Eds.), *Protecting children from abuse and neglect* (pp. 131–181). Guilford Press.

Publisher's Note: *The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher, editors, or the editorial board.*