

RESEARCH BRIEF: CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG WOMEN IN EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA, AND HONDURAS

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a profound social and public health problem that includes forced sex, either attempted or consummated, unwanted sexual contact, and comments or advances of a sexual nature by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim.¹ A recent report by the World Health Organization stated that between 8 and 26 percent of women and girls report having experienced some type of sexual violence either as children or adults.² These percentages, however, undoubtedly underestimate the true seriousness and frequency of the problem. Because of methodological and definitional challenges associated with studying sexual violence, and the fact that most women are reluctant to disclose personal information about their own sexually violent experiences,^{3, 4, 5} data are difficult to obtain. Although researchers know that women experience sexual violence at young ages, little is known about sexual abuse during pre-teen and early teen years.

Current literature on child sexual abuse and its consequences is limited. In addition, because of the lack of a standard definition of “child” sexual abuse among researchers of sexual violence, existing studies often cannot be compared. Furthermore, despite the varying definitions in the literature, sexual abuse of women during childhood or early adolescence has been primarily associated with reproductive health problems. Previous research has demonstrated that women who have been sexually abused as children are more likely to experience early (voluntary) sexual activity, unintended pregnancy, multiple sexual partners, depression, reproductive tract infections, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and subsequent sexual victimization.⁶ Moreover, a report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that used U.S. data found that victims of childhood sexual abuse were three to five times more likely than other people to experience sexual abuse as adults.⁷ Studies conducted in Latin America also have found that women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse are more vulnerable to subsequent non-consensual sex, increased risk of unsafe sex, and poor mental and psycho-social outcomes.⁸

Limited data are available on male perpetrators of child sexual abuse and their victims. Several studies, however, have found that perpetrators tend to be well known to the victim or her family.^{9, 10} Family associates and non-paternal relatives, such as brothers and other relations, were more often reported as perpetrators than fathers/stepfathers.^{9, 10} One study in New Zealand found that although non-paternal relatives were the most frequently reported perpetrators, fathers or stepfathers were most likely to perpetrate intrusive and frequent child sexual abuse. In the same study, only a small number of perpetrators were reported as strangers.¹¹

This research brief is one in a series of related publications intended to contribute to understanding the complex dimensions of violence against women in three Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This brief focuses on the prevalence of child sexual abuse among women, the perpetrators of that abuse, and the associations of child sexual abuse with two health outcomes: (1) having a premarital pregnancy and (2) being in a violent relationship later in life.^{12, 13, 14}



METHODS AND DEFINITIONS

This research brief examines data from three population-based surveys of women that were conducted in Central America: (1) the El Salvador National Family Health Survey, 2002-03; (2) the Guatemala National Maternal and Child Health Survey, 2002; and (3) the Honduras National Epidemiology and Family Health Survey, 2001. Each of these surveys was based on a nationally representative sample of women aged 15–49 years old. All three countries inquired about sexual violence, including age at first occurrence and the relationship of the victims to the perpetrators of the violence. In this brief, “child” sexual abuse is defined as “abuse reported by women to have occurred before age 15.” Data from El Salvador distinguish between penetrative forced sex and non-penetrative sexual abuse, whereas questions asked in Guatemala and Honduras combined the two types of sexual abuse. Data were analyzed using STATA, Version 7 SE. Chi-square tests were performed to examine whether differences observed were significant. All analyses were adjusted for the complex survey design and included sampling weights. Details of the different question designs for the three surveys are presented in Box 1.

Box 1.

Questions on Child Abuse in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras

El Salvador:

- Have you ever been forced to have sex (i.e., raped)?
- Has anyone ever forced you to do one of the following: undress, touch or be touched on your private parts, kiss, hug, or engage in any other sexual act without penetration?

Guatemala:

- Before you were 12 years old, do you remember if anyone older than you touched you in a sexual way or had sex with you?
- After your 12th birthday, do you remember if anyone has forced you physically to have sex or engage in any sexual act against your will?

Honduras:

- Since you were 12 years old to the present: do you remember if someone forced you to have sex or to participate in any sexual act that you did not want?
- Before you were 12 years old: do you remember if someone forced you to have sex or to participate in any sexual act that you did not want?

All Countries:

For those who experienced sexual abuse, follow-up questions on the perpetrator and the age at which the first abuse occurred were asked.

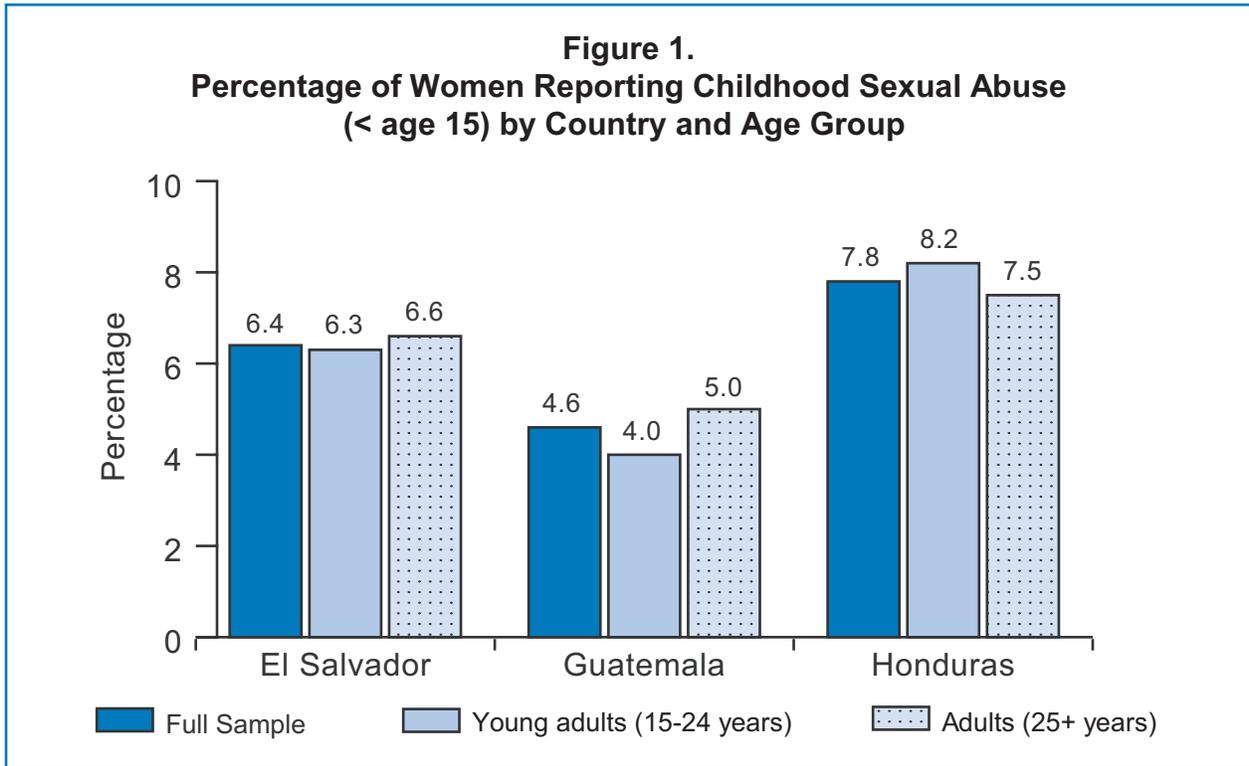
KEY FINDINGS

AGE AT FIRST OCCURRENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE

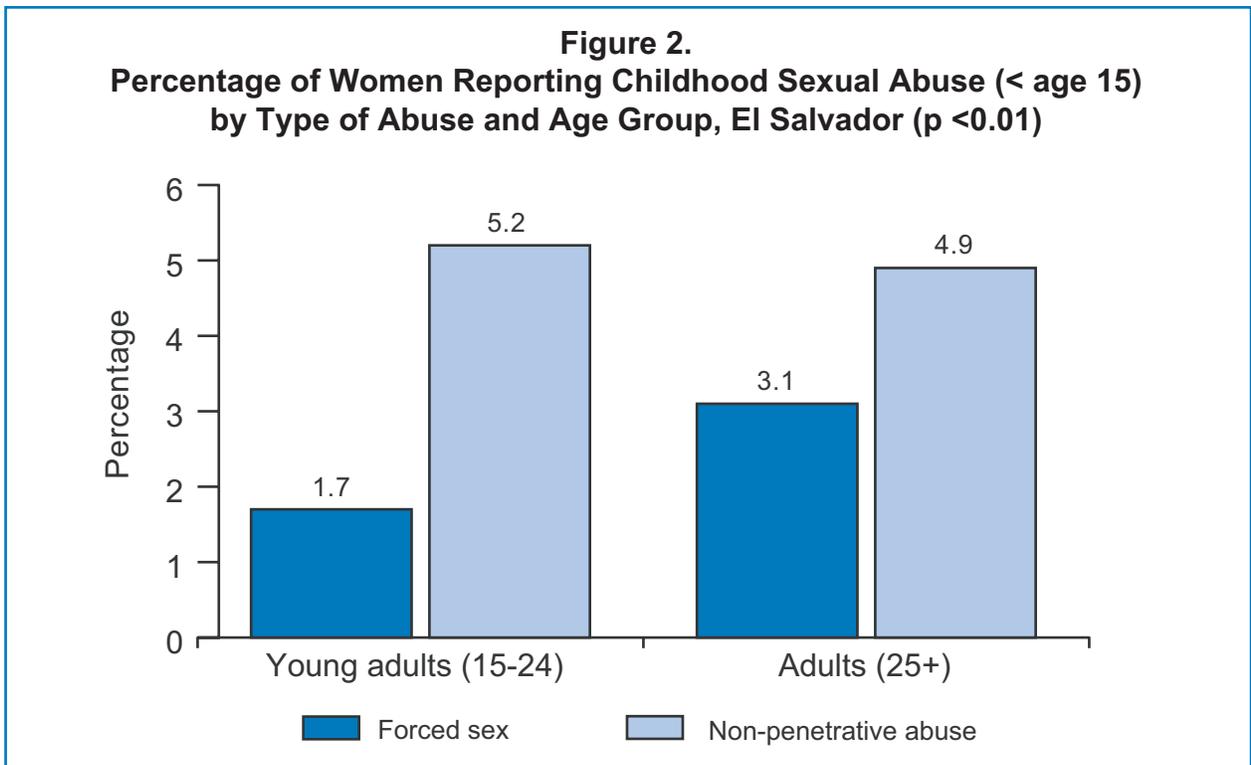
Among the women surveyed the proportion from each country that reported having been sexually abused (including both forced sex and non-penetrative abuse) was as follows: El Salvador, 12 percent; Guatemala, 7 percent; and Honduras, 13 percent. The average age of first sexual abuse was 14 years old in Guatemala and 15 in both El Salvador and Honduras. In all three countries, between one-half and two-thirds of sexually abused women reported that their first abusive experience occurred before age 15: 52 percent in El Salvador, 66 percent in Guatemala, and 58 percent in Honduras. In El Salvador, where the survey questions distinguished between forced sex and non-penetrative sexual abuse, the average age of first forced sex was almost 18 years old, whereas the average age of first non-penetrative abuse was significantly lower, at just under 15 years of age.

PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO EXPERIENCED CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

In all three countries, women of all ages were asked whether their first sexual abuse experience occurred before they were age 15. Figure 1 presents the percentage of participants in each country, organized by age group at the time of the interview, who reported being abused before age 15. As shown in the figure, Honduras had the highest percentage of women (7.8 percent) who reported having been sexually abused before age 15, followed by El Salvador (6.4 percent) and Guatemala (4.6 percent). Differences in reported child abuse by age group were not significant, indicating that no notable change occurred in reported prevalence of abuse between older and younger cohorts of women.

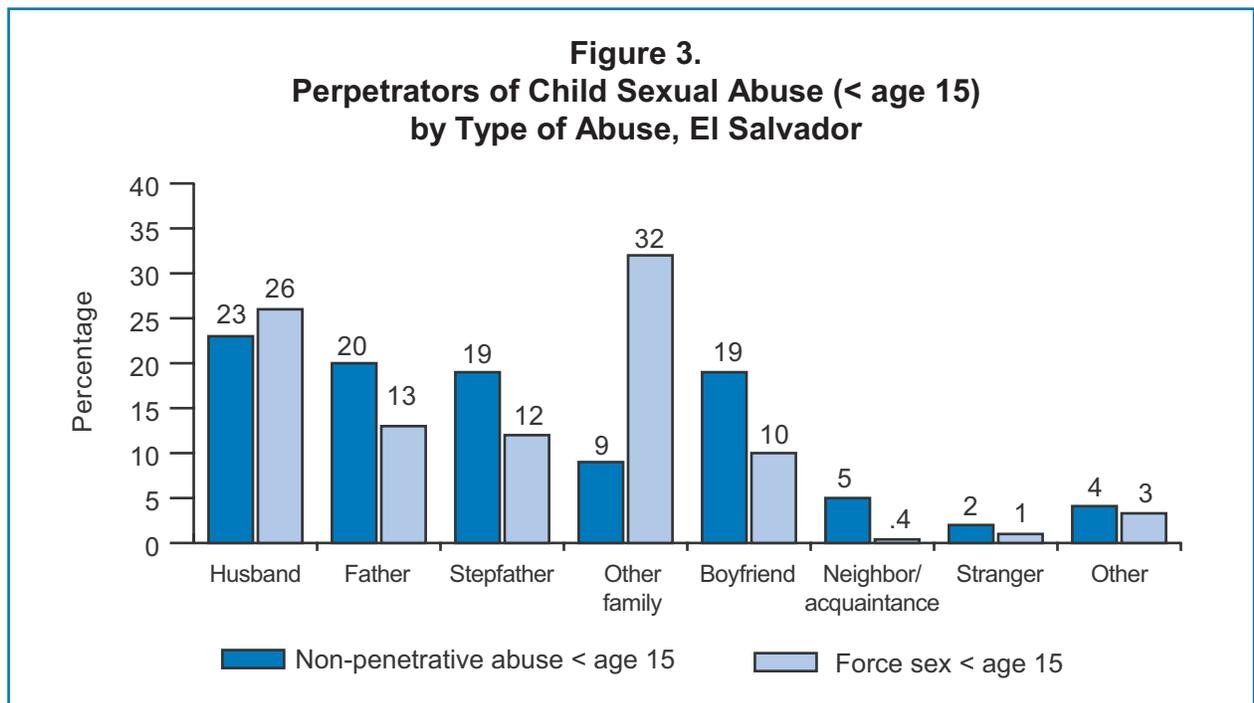


In El Salvador, where the survey questionnaire differentiated between penetrative and non-penetrative sexual abuse, results showed (Figure 2) that among young adult women between ages 15 and 24 years old at the time of the survey, 1.7 percent had experienced forced sex, and 5.2 percent had experienced non-penetrative sexual abuse before they were 15 years old. The experiences of women who were aged 25 years or older at the time of the survey were somewhat different: 3.1 percent stated that they were forced to have sex before age 15, compared with the 1.7 percent reported by the cohort of 15- to 24-year-olds ($p < 0.01$).



PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

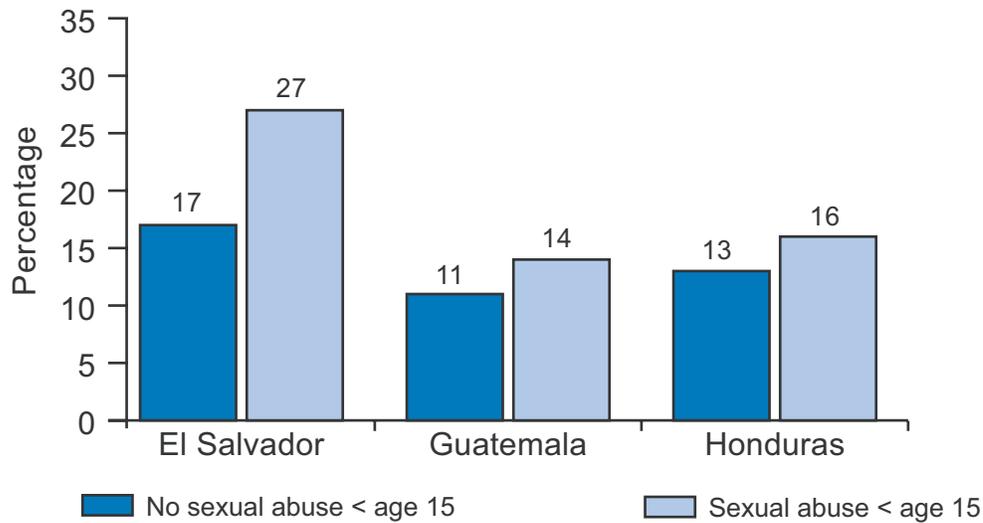
Women who reported child sexual abuse were asked about the perpetrators of the abuse, the type of sexual abuse they experienced, and the age at which the first episode of sexual abuse took place. Consistent with other research, in all three countries, the perpetrators tended to be persons known to the victim. Figure 3 illustrates that in El Salvador, the perpetrators of early non-penetrative abuse tended to be either a family member—other than a father or stepfather—or neighbors. In contrast, women who experienced early forced sex reported more often that the perpetrator was a father or stepfather.



PREMARITAL PREGNANCIES AMONG 15- TO 24- YEAR-OLDS

In all three countries, young adult women aged 15–24 years old who had been previously pregnant were asked who their sexual partners were at the time of their first pregnancy. Using data from the birth and marital histories of each respondent, it was possible to determine whether the respondent's first pregnancy was premarital. Figure 4 shows the percentage of premarital first pregnancies of young adult women, aged 15–24 years at the time of the survey, according to whether or not the woman had experienced sexual abuse (either forced sex or non-penetrative abuse) before age 15. In El Salvador, young adult women who had a pregnancy and who reported sexual abuse before age 15 were significantly more likely to have had a premarital first pregnancy (27 percent) than women who had not experienced early sexual abuse (17 percent). In both Guatemala and Honduras, a smaller proportion of all first pregnancies to young adults were premarital, and no significant difference was found between the women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse and the women who had not.

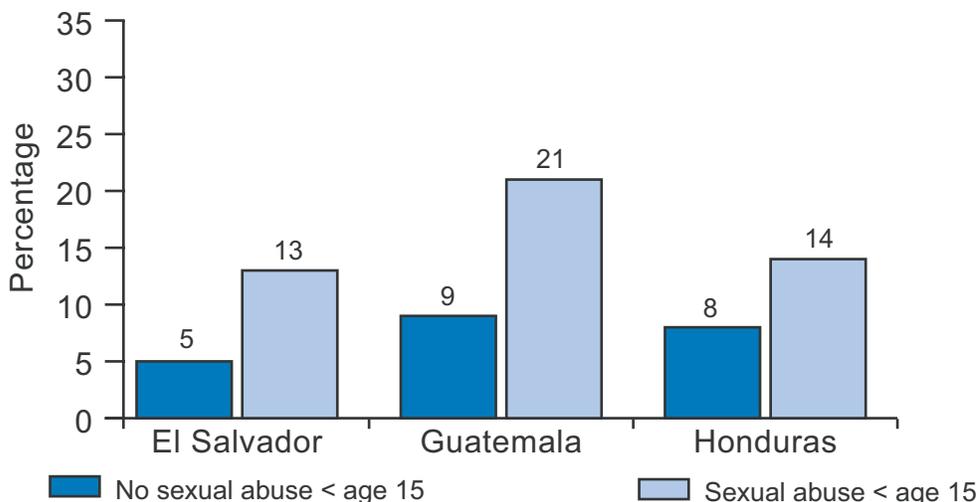
Figure 4.
Percentage of Women Age 15-24 Who Had a First Premarital Pregnancy
by Experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse (< age 15) (p <0.01)



PHYSICAL VIOLENCE AMONG WOMEN WHO HAD AN INTIMATE PARTNER WITHIN THE PAST YEAR

Women who had an intimate partner at the time of the survey and who had experienced childhood sexual abuse were more likely than the women who had not experienced childhood sexual abuse to have experienced physical violence from an intimate partner within the past year. Recent intimate partner violence included both physical violence (e.g., hitting, kicking, threatening with a weapon) and forced intercourse. Figure 5 provides, by country, the percentage of recent intimate partner violence by whether or not the woman had experienced child sexual abuse. The percentage of recent partner violence was at least two times higher in all three countries between women who had been sexually abused before age 15 and women who had not.

Figure 5.
Percentage of Women who Experienced Recent Intimate Partner Physical or
Sexual Violence by Experience of Childhood Sexual Abuse (< age 15) (p < 0.001)



CONCLUSIONS

This analysis has demonstrated both new and important findings about child sexual abuse among women of the Central American region:

- In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras between one-half and two-thirds of sexually abused women reported that their first experience of sexual abuse occurred before 15 years old.
- In El Salvador, the average age of the first non-penetrative sexual abuse was younger (less than 15 years old) than the average age of the first forced sexual abuse with penetration (almost 18 years old).
- The vast majority of sexual abuse perpetrators were known by the victim and lived close to the victim's home and environment.
- Recent physical violence by an intimate partner was at least two times more prevalent among women who had been sexually abused before age 15 than among women who had not been abused.

POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS

It is important to recognize that sexual violence is an endemic problem within the societies studied. Recommendations that have been suggested in the literature to address the problem include the following:

- Improving multi-level coordination between many sectors of the community—including governmental agencies, courts, non-governmental organizations, health care, parent and youth organizations, schools, and churches—can contribute to the development of a national strategy to protect the youngest members of society against sexual abuse.¹⁵
- Growing evidence shows that the reproductive health consequences of child sexual abuse are severe and include early voluntary premarital sexual activity, unwanted pregnancies, STIs, and subsequent abuse. It is important that health care professionals recognize and respond to the presence of childhood sexual abuse in women's lives.¹⁶
- During recent years, efforts to strengthen laws on violence against women have been successful in Latin America. While changes in legislation are essential, so are greater efforts to implement existing laws effectively.¹⁷
- Efforts focusing on the prevention of sexual abuse, in addition to the implementation of services for the victims and/or penalties for the perpetrators, are essential to reduce and eliminate the problem. Parents must be informed of the prevalence of child sexual abuse and encouraged to talk with their children about recognizing and protecting themselves from unwanted sexual advances. Furthermore, education for young people is vital to help enable them to protect themselves and to encourage them to seek appropriate and youth-friendly counseling and care.²

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