Vulnerability and Early Intervention
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Abstract:

Listening and observation are vital to understand vulnerable context, especially when the subject matter is the "voice of a child". An early intervention at 'vulnerable points' will act as a gatekeeper that will prevent abuse probably leading to a safe childhood. Benchmarking the vulnerable quotient from a child's perception, feeling power and context is pertinent before drafting any strategies. The linkage between early intervention and vulnerability are discussed with a few illustrations.

Key Words: Early intervention, Vulnerability, school social work in India

Introduction:

Vulnerability is contextual and one needs to adopt inclusive approach to analyse and infer. To explore in depth, adults need to observe and listen to children objectively. Vigorous interventions during the vulnerable phase of a child is pertinent for two reasons:

1. The child is "voiceless and powerless" and prone to be vulnerable.

2. Adult key stakeholders decide the intervention. Foreseeing a vulnerable situation of a child is a key factor in effective intervention.

Concepts:

V-Vulnerability - A defect in the environment and system that causes situations of poverty, exposure to risks, hindrance to coping, causing insecurity in the life of a child is conceptualised as vulnerability. This state can form the basis for a child to get abused.

Early intervention:

"Early intervention should ensure that the line of difference between states of 'being vulnerable, possible abuse and safety' -- one step before getting abused; one step before getting further trapped into vulnerable conditions; and one step ahead ensuring safety of the individual child to live with dignity".
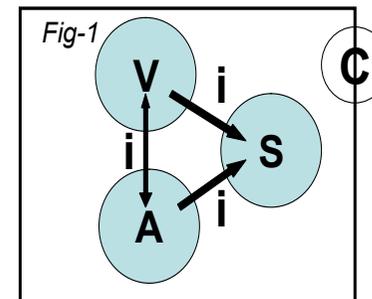
Method:

Key stakeholders including children from authors' own dozen and more workshops (during 2013-2014) represent the data as listed below:

✴Focused group discussions
✴Mapping of life histories
✴Rewinding childhood memories
✴Poster making
✴Role-plays
✴Self-recorded illustrations

add to make qualitative inferences.

Conceptual framework:

Fig-1

In general, the zones of vulnerability, abuse and safety are arbitrary, but remain mutually exclusive. An incident, in the given context, can either escalate the vulnerable conditions or be dormant in between the grey zone of safety and vulnerability. Planning of interventions and instituting governing systems differ contextually.

Fig-2
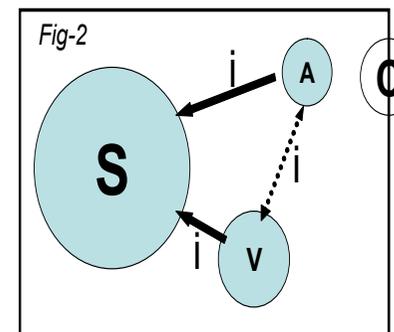
Early effective interventions should aim at ensuring safety (See Fig-1) by mapping the vulnerable situation (V), abusive incidents (A) and safety gears (S) within the context (c) given. The context may be family, school, peer group, community and so forth.

Minimising the vulnerability:

The interventions if pivoted at vulnerable phase may avoid occurrence of abuses and may minimize vulnerable situation or foster reversing to safety zone. However early and strategic the interventions are, our hypothesis that function of (A) or (V) will be equal to zero is always disproved (See Fig-2).

Key observation:

✴Vulnerability is contextual and hence the role of supportive circles and interventions will vary. Involvement of children to have a proper understanding is very essential.

✴The zone of vulnerability is a quicksand where children slip into out of ignorance, experimental, habitual or lesser-planned involvement of key stakeholders.

✴Interventions remain relatively less planned! Attempts are made mostly after the occurrence of abuse than identifying vulnerable factors before. The concept of vulnerability is relative by context.

✴Vulnerability triggers abuse – vice versa also can be true– So interventions should address both.

✴An incident cuts across different forms of abuses, causing difficulties in identifying the vulnerability of a child.

✴Child-related problems are less often viewed from child's eyes and emotions, objectively. Adults fail to take up the cues from children due to lack of skill and their attitude towards the child. Otherwise, this perception would have prevented many vulnerable situations.

✴If interventions at vulnerability focus on building of individual skill sets, it may yield sustainable results– even while supportive circles fail to.

✴ Interventions shall be sustainable if aimed at behaviour modification of the abuser and adults rather than materialistic progress of the abused.

Research questions:

The above observations yield three broad discussion points:

✴Is Vulnerability innate?

✴Where is the locus of control?

✴How far can an early intervention in 'vulnerable zone' avoid abuse and increase safety?

Indicators of vulnerability:

Multiple structural and functional factors trigger vulnerability as listed below:

✴Accidents

✴Long distance to school

✴Migration

✴Displacement

✴Re-marriage of a parent

Meek acceptance:

Vulnerability as a quotient may sometimes be mere inheritance without questioning, and most of the times imposed by external social circle purposely. One tends to dwell in this state of ill-being presuming otherwise as fatal, despite discomfort.

Reasoning for redemption:

Asking why's and how's have changed many mundane blind socio-cultural practices like child labour, child marriage and even displacement. Always an audit of the situation, especially by an outsider, will provide more revelation. There will be arguments for both submission and oppression. If submissive, one tends to be more vulnerable as oppressed.

Illustration:1

Roja, from a migrant, landless, rural family, is aged 14 years and studying in class 9. Her expression was,'...two years ago, when I came to this new town-school I felt out of place at the sight of everything. My name, accent, body odour and school bag were laughing points. I used

to cry and avoid classes. Teachers gave me a few errands to which other students' parents may object. While boys drew cartoons on me, I could not laugh, but still tolerated. When girls drew pictures on my shirt, I felt ashamed. I wanted to run away from here. My mother says, "in village we may face 'other problem'". My father says 'we are moneyless to fight back and not to cry'. My teacher says, 'do not create a scene over nothing...'" No one took my complaint seriously. I am angry with God.

Systemised vulnerability:

As in this illustration-1, the entire family has listed out characteristics of ill-being such as illiteracy, landlessness, migrance, poverty, submission, guilt and so forth as inborn quality. So, the family submits to any kind of ill-treatment. Neither parents felt the pain from the child's perspective nor school empower the child to face the situation.

inherited vulnerability:

The change of environment has begun to assure sustenance in new town but has not changed their perspective towards child rights or power. The family carries and transfers this culture of submissiveness and dependency

syndrome to the next generation. Stakes did not pick up the cues of vulnerability while the child utters "I wanted to run away'. Vulnerability triggers Abuse – vice versa also can be true – interventions should address both these to make the invisible visible.

Internal locus of control:

Vulnerability has the following internal loci of control:

✴Age

✴Sex

✴Gender orientation

✴Physical and mental disabilities

✴Educational level and

✴Capacity

✴Illness

✴Mental strength

External locus of control:

Vulnerability has the following external loci of control also:

✴Multiculturalism

✴Migratory status

✴Social power

✴Recognition

✴Economic standard

✴Calamities

✴Dependency and

✴Poverty

All the above individually and in combination, add to external locus of control. Intervening stakes shall focus more on internal controllable factors to mitigate vulnerable situations. A

child is powerless and tender to make decisions and hence the role of key stakes remains crucial. The power of listening to the child's words and observing the situation objectively will be a major factor for successful intervention.

Parental betrayal:

The dimensions of vulnerability may involve migratory status, multicultural marriages, skill of survival. Parents' insecure feeling in a different cultural scenario out of survival need might push them to cope with their situation. Parents in subconscious knew the cues of bullying but wanted to downplay. May be parents perceive their migratory status as a legacy, absolve the vulnerable situation which they expect the children to cope up with.

Fight or flight:

Being born and reared in an advanced culture a child like Rony face bullying because of her skin colour, accent and height which are not of her choice. While you dwell deep to find where the flaw is, you may find it in the family upbringing, weak school norms, intolerance to coexist with multicultural groups or self-made and many more. Such incidents cut across different types of abuses as well as different contexts and require a comprehensive and inclusive approach to tackle the problem.

Resource mobilisation:

All stakes may have to pool their skill sets to analyze the problem contextually; arrive at composite indices of vulnerability and design interventions to uphold child's dignity. Interventions on the controllable internal factors such as child's esteem, complexities, skills, maturity and so forth probably will mitigate vulnerable situations as well as empower the child to stay put and fit in the given context rather than shifting contexts of vulnerability. All stakes should come together to overcome their incapability and difficulties in preparing the child to face the situation; in constantly watching the risk zones of the child; and listening objectively to the fact and expressions of a child. The degree of vulnerability and the extent of dependency syndrome complement mutually one another if the internal locus of control is ignored.

Early intervention for safety:

The 'state of being vulnerable' cuts across multiple contexts and is governed by multiple factors. To decide upon earliness of the intervention one should be capable enough to contextualize the situation. The recent incidents as reported in media substantiate our discussion. Let us discuss two of them hereunder to identify vulnerable zone.

Illustration:2

Rony, an African, 16 years, born to parents of two different races, started education a bit late and now tend to drop out. She is bullied for her complexion, height, accent and body language. In her words, "it is vulgar, intolerable, insulting." The teachers comment on it as "lame excuse to avoid studies". The counsellor observes it as "attention-seeking behaviour'. Class mates remark, "She is exaggerating."Parents reconciled in compromising, consoling and convincing her to break school for a year. Rony, felt relieved but wanted to have a student-status. She joined martial arts, painting and first-aid courses. Parents' effort to put her back in school seems fading. The strong reasons put forth by the child are admitted again to 7th grade; looking "huge" in the class; classmates may bully!! She picks up new friends out of school, hangs out, cuts classes and picks up habits. Parents are not sure if their intervention is late, right or sustain.

Illustration: 3

A glimpse of incidents in Google, as per media reports.

"Child sold to bangle industry, working and living in the underground of the store"

"Suspension from school for a particular behaviour as unacceptable in a co-ed school"

"A boy wandering on streets picked up by mistake by a hotel staff, given menial tasks and brutally beaten up for not obeying"

"Differently abled and challenged children are caned by teachers as part of disciplining"

"Girl child employed, tortured, assaulted in all forms by a family for about two years"

"Little girl raped by the trainer despite provision for surveillance"

A group of boys from a backward state is sold out to an industrial state for labour.

Watched by the Government:

The vulnerability indices include both push and pull factors such as district is backward, parents lack livelihood options, literacy level is low, children are given birth to earn, and children lack exposure on risks, power, rights and many more. Had the districts of origin were under

surveillance of the government and other committees meant for child welfare, a data bank on "child in vulnerable" instead of "missing children" might have been there. The resources and damage at vulnerable state of being may be minimal than at abusive state. A flawless system and environment may prevent a child from sliding into vulnerable situation.

Minimising vulnerability:

Inclusiveness is the key to minimize vulnerable state of being. A child's feelings and discomfort are addressed superficially and may be undermined. An adolescent is punished for unapproved behaviour inside the school compound. The disciplining procedures have forced the child to experience guilt, shy and fear and lack of confidence to face dear and near. Our tools of disciplining break to pieces the self-esteem of the child!

Intervention strategy:

The dimension of vulnerability decides the intensity, degree and design of intervention. Any incident should be looked within the context and its overlapping zones to plan. Intervention plan should focus on both ensuring present safety as well as preparing a child to be self-driven and self-conscious for self-governance. Oppressive behaviours are predominantly hidden under the carpet or amicably settled in due course. Both the fear of being ostracized and/ or the taboo attached to legal intervention is all adult-centric perceptions and decisions. It may be a fact that adults themselves are finding difficulties in handling abuser as well as preparing the child to be vociferous. Vulnerability triggers Abuse – vice versa also can be true – interventions should address both these. Abuse, becomes an addiction. Hence intensive interventions are needed to induce a behaviour change.

Dimensions of safety:

Safety: is it a feeling?

Alternatively, does it connote physical dimensions?

Most often, on the pretext of safety adults tend to act as a superior to the child where the child is neither informed with do's and don'ts nor discussed with the choices available to them nor in due course the adult collects appropriate information – from children especially. While it comes to safety there is a need for a behavioural change. Why, what, when, who and how certainly enables all stakes to think and reflect the concept of safety in a constructive form. This measure of safety becomes sustained and practical if children are well informed, equally consulted and convinced without compromise.

Conclusion:

Vulnerable is a transit zone between Safe and Abuse. A constructive outlook and inclusive approach will pre-empt child trapped into vulnerable zone. The concept of vulnerability is macro and to ensure safety more research that is comprehensive is required. Involvement of children to map vulnerability and abuse zones is becoming more crucial. Capacity building of adults to work with oppressors, to hone skills of objective listening, conduct research, and develop tools to track vulnerability will ensure better world for children.

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