

## Child abuse

I want to talk to you about something that makes us uncomfortable. Something we'd rather not discuss. Something that happens in the shadows of our communities, our families, our neighborhoods but affects the very foundation of our society.

I want to talk about childhood sexual abuse.

The ages from 12 are supposed to be about growth, discovery, and building confidence. These are the years when children develop their sense of self, learn to trust their instincts, and begin to understand the world around them. But what happens when that world betrays them in the most profound way possible?

Today, I will share two stories with you. These are not fictional accounts. These are real experiences from real survivors who have found the courage to speak so that others might be protected.

The first story is about an eleven-year-old girl. Her father's friend lived next door - someone who had been welcomed into their home countless times.

One day, when she was alone at home, this trusted family friend came over. What started as a friendly visit became something terrifying and confusing. He touched her inappropriately, telling her it was their "special secret."

This wasn't an isolated incident. Every time her parents weren't home, he would find an excuse to come over. She didn't understand what was happening to her, but she knew it felt wrong. The confusion was overwhelming - this was someone her family trusted.

She wanted to tell someone, but who? Would her parents believe her? She carried this burden alone, watching her parents warmly greet the man who was destroying her sense of safety.

When she finally got admission to a government hostel, she thought her nightmare was over. But holidays meant returning home, and returning home meant facing him again. The abuse continued during her visits home. She became afraid of her own house - the place that should have been her sanctuary.

She started spending holidays at her grandmother's place instead, making excuses to avoid going home. But the damage was already done.

In school, her friends noticed changes. She would suddenly start crying in class, unable to control her emotions. Her mind would wander, unable to focus on lessons. The trauma was so deep that tears would come without warning.

The vibrant, curious child was disappearing, replaced by someone who lived in constant fear and confusion.

The second story reminds us that sometimes the people we should trust most become the source of our deepest pain.

During a family festival, a young girl was staying at her relatives' house, surrounded by extended family. These were supposed to be the moments that made childhood magical - the excitement of visiting relatives, the special foods, the celebrations.

That night, as she slept peacefully, a middle-aged relative - a man in his fifties who had always been kind to her - quietly lay down beside her. He began touching her inappropriately while she was half-asleep.

She was frozen - not just by fear, but by complete confusion. This was family. This was supposed to be safe. How could she scream? How could she react? Who would believe her?

The incident lasted only minutes, but its impact would last months. She remained in trauma, unable to process what had happened. She couldn't tell her parents - how do you tell them that their trusted relative had violated their daughter? How do you explain that the family gathering they had looked forward to had become a nightmare?

These stories aren't just about individual experiences - they represent a systemic failure that affects thousands of children in our communities.

Let me be clear about something: I don't only blame the perpetrators. Yes, they are criminals who must be held accountable. But I also blame society - and sometimes, the victims' families themselves.

If a child is unable to share what happened to them, we must ask ourselves: what have we done wrong as parents, as communities, as a society?

In many families, especially in our culture, parents respond to dangers by restricting girls' freedom rather than addressing the actual threats. When something happens, we blame the girl. We question her actions. We impose more restrictions. But restrictions don't create safety - they create isolation.

What a girl needs is not restrictions - she needs support. She needs to be reminded of how strong she is. She needs to know that she will be believed, protected, and loved unconditionally.

But what happens instead? When society hears of such incidents, they often blame the girl. They make her feel unsafe to even speak. If her parents had created a supportive environment, if society didn't shame her, she could have shared her trauma and found some relief.

We often say that youth are the pillars of our nation's development. But I ask you this: if our children are experiencing such trauma, if they're carrying these invisible wounds, if they're struggling just to survive - where will that development come from?

How can we expect traumatized children to grow into strong, contributing adults? How can we build a strong society on a foundation of broken childhoods?

This is not just about individual cases. This is about our collective future. This is about the kind of society we are building - or destroying.

Every teacher in this room - you have the power to notice when a child is struggling and provide a safe space for them to speak.

Every parent in this room - you have the power to create an environment where your child feels safe sharing anything with you.

Every community member in this room - you have the power to challenge victim-blaming attitudes and support survivors.

This is not someone else's responsibility. This is our responsibility. All of ours.

But change is possible. When we act together, we can break this cycle and build a safer world for our children.

Thank you