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ADOLESCENT KNOWLEDGE OF SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MEDAN

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Abstract

Background: Sexual abuse remains a pressing concern among adolescents, particularly in Indonesia, where rising cases indicate both systemic and educational gaps. Adolescents are developmentally vulnerable and often lack the necessary knowledge to identify, resist, or report abusive behavior.

Objective: This study aimed to assess the level of knowledge about sexual abuse among female adolescents attending a public junior high school in Medan, Indonesia.

Methods: A descriptive quantitative design was employed, involving 106 female students selected from a population of 376 through proportionate stratified random sampling. Data were collected using validated questionnaires measuring demographic characteristics and knowledge of sexual abuse. The sexual abuse knowledge instrument consisted of 26 items, demonstrating strong internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.879). Data were analyzed using univariate analysis to determine frequency distributions.

Result: The results revealed that 79.2% of respondents possessed good knowledge about sexual abuse, while 20.8% had sufficient knowledge. Most participants had received information from parents, schools, peers, and digital media. However, 21.7% reported having experienced sexual abuse, highlighting a significant gap between awareness and real-life prevention. Knowledge was highest regarding physical forms of abuse and lowest concerning non-verbal forms, such as inappropriate gestures or stares.

Conclusion: Adolescents demonstrate generally good knowledge about sexual abuse; notable weaknesses persist in recognizing non-verbal abuse and translating awareness into protective behavior. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive, multi-source educational interventions emphasizing practical prevention skills and reporting mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse among adolescents remains an unresolved issue with far-reaching consequences, particularly in nations like Indonesia, where awareness, prevention, and support systems are still evolving. As defined by the World Health Organization (2020), child sexual abuse includes any form of sexual activity that a minor is unable to comprehend, consent to, or resist due to developmental

immaturity. The concern is not limited to direct physical contact; it spans non-contact actions such as exhibitionism, online grooming, and inappropriate communication. Statistics from global health organizations paint a stark picture: nearly one-third of women worldwide report having experienced sexual or physical abuse, and more than 120 million children under the age of 20 have been victims of sexual violence. Adolescents, caught in the delicate transition from childhood to adulthood, often lack the emotional tools and cognitive readiness to identify and confront abusive situations (Azrina et al., 2024). In Indonesia, this problem is compounded by cultural taboos and systemic gaps. According to Nabilah (2024), reports of sexual abuse surged from 2,134 cases in 2020 to nearly 4,000 in 2021, before slightly decreasing in 2023 to 2,363.

The adolescent stage is characterized by cognitive exploration, emotional sensitivity, and increased exposure to peer and digital influences. During this time, individuals begin to form their understanding of relationships, personal boundaries, and societal norms. Unfortunately, this phase also coincides with a heightened susceptibility to coercion and manipulation. Although efforts to disseminate information on sexual abuse have expanded in recent years, research indicates that adolescents often possess only a surface-level understanding of the issue (Hafizah et al., 2024). The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) reported a 15% rise in abuse cases involving minors in 2024, with over 4,500 reports submitted by October, many of which involved schools as the location of abuse. The presence of such cases within educational settings, where safety and guidance should be guaranteed, is especially alarming (William, 2022).

While legal protections exist, their enforcement remains inconsistent. National educational standards offer limited content on sexual abuse prevention, often integrated into broader subjects like civic or religious education. Teachers may lack training, and parents often avoid these topics due to discomfort or cultural norms. As a result, many students remain ill-equipped to recognize the different forms of abuse or to know what steps to take when faced with them (Mulya et al., 2021). Although punishment for perpetrators is important, preventative efforts, particularly education and empowerment, are more sustainable and impactful in the long run.

Comprehensive sexual education has been proposed as a more effective means to address this gap. Guidelines from WHO and UNICEF recommend that such education include lessons on consent, personal boundaries, types of abuse, and mechanisms for reporting. These topics should be taught in a manner that is both age-appropriate and culturally sensitive. However, translating these guidelines into classroom practice remains difficult. Schools in Indonesia vary widely in how they interpret and implement these recommendations. Without consistent policy support and training, many educators shy away from the subject, leaving adolescents uninformed or misinformed (Putri et al., 2024).

Researchers have suggested that adolescents should receive information from multiple sources, including families, teachers, peers, and online platforms, to counter these limitations. A study by Andriani & Suhrawardi (2022) found that adolescents exposed to open conversations at home and structured discussions at school demonstrated greater awareness and assertiveness in recognizing and

responding to abuse. Social media also plays a critical role, especially in the digital era, though its effectiveness depends heavily on the quality and credibility of the content. Rahman & Primanita (2022) observed that adolescents who actively discussed sexual behavior and harassment in peer groups developed higher self-awareness, which in turn helped them identify verbal abuse more effectively.

In addition to evaluating overall awareness, researchers have focused on specific types of abuse to identify gaps in understanding. Wafa et al. (2023) found that students were generally able to recognize physical forms of abuse but had difficulty identifying verbal and non-verbal abuse. Similar findings were reported by Hafizah et al. (2024), who noted that roughly one-third of adolescents did not perceive sexually suggestive gestures or invasive stares as abusive. According to Mathew et al. (2022), adolescents who received case-based or scenario-driven instruction showed better retention of knowledge and stronger interpretative skills when faced with ambiguous situations. This suggests that abstract definitions alone are insufficient; practical, relatable examples are essential for effective learning.

Despite these contributions, knowledge levels among Indonesian adolescents remain uneven. Supiana et al. (2022) reported that in a junior high school in Mataram, only a small fraction of students had a solid understanding of sexual abuse, while nearly a quarter had poor knowledge. A similar trend was observed by Dewi et al. (2024), who found that most students aged 15 in Ruteng Cancar had only moderate awareness. These inconsistencies may be the result of differences in teaching methods, resource availability, or parental involvement. Moreover, few studies have investigated knowledge levels in schools where abuse has actually occurred, which could offer important insights into the relationship between exposure and awareness.

Previous studies evaluated students' knowledge in schools in general without considering that the school had been the site of sexual abuse cases. This study specifically took place at a public junior high school in Medan that had a history of sexual abuse cases. It explored how experiences in the school environment affected students' level of knowledge, learning patterns, and responses to the issue of sexual abuse. This is an important novelty that has not been widely explored in previous studies. Some previous studies have examined sources of knowledge separately but have not linked them to students' personal experiences. This study identifies the level of knowledge, sources of information (family, school, friends, social media), and experiences of abuse that respondents have experienced, thereby describing the relationship between knowledge, experience, and social environment.

METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a descriptive quantitative design to understand knowledge about sexual abuse among female adolescents attending SMP Negeri 31 Medan, Indonesia.

Settings

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 31 Medan, a public junior high school located in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The research was conducted from October 2024 to December 2024.

Research subject

The target population was all female students enrolled in grades VII, VIII, and IX at SMP Negeri 31 Medan. The total student population at the time of data collection was 376, and the study employed a proportionate stratified random sampling technique to ensure representative coverage across the three grade levels. Stratified random sampling was chosen because it increases precision in estimates and reduces sampling bias by ensuring that each subgroup within the population is adequately represented (Azrina et al., 2024). From the total population, 106 students were selected as the study sample, with proportional representation from each grade based on enrollment numbers. Inclusion criteria for participants included active enrollment in school and willingness to participate, as indicated by informed consent. Students absent during data collection or unwilling to participate were excluded from the study.

Data collection

Data were collected using two primary instruments: a demographic questionnaire and a sexual abuse knowledge questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire included items on age, grade level, exposure to sexual abuse, and sources of information about sexual abuse. The sexual abuse knowledge instrument consisted of 26 items covering the forms, impacts, and prevention of sexual abuse. These items were developed based on prior literature and adapted to the Indonesian adolescent context to ensure cultural relevance and comprehensibility (Suhariyati et al., 2024). Each item was presented in a statement format with response options designed to assess the participants' level of knowledge.

Respondents' data was collected by requesting permission from the principal of SMP Negeri 31 Medan. The researchers coordinated with the vice principal to identify respondents according to the predetermined inclusion criteria. The researchers collected data by entering each predetermined class, explaining the purpose of the research to the respondents, obtaining informed consent from respondents who were willing to participate in the research, distributing questionnaires and explaining how to fill them out to the respondents, accompanying the respondents during the research, and checking the questionnaires that the respondents had filled out.

Before use, the sexual abuse knowledge questionnaire underwent a rigorous validation process. Content validity was established through expert review, and the Content Validity Index (CVI) confirmed the adequacy of item representation, with a CVI score of 0.90. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, resulting in a coefficient of 0.879, which indicates high internal consistency. The questionnaire was administered in person during school hours in a classroom setting, under the supervision of trained research assistants. Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity to minimize social desirability bias and encourage honest responses.

Data Analysis

The collected data were coded, cleaned, and analyzed using univariate statistical methods. Frequency distributions and percentages were calculated to describe respondent characteristics and levels of knowledge about sexual abuse. The use of univariate analysis is appropriate for descriptive studies where the primary aim is to summarize sample data without making inferential comparisons.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee at Universitas Sumatera Utara, under approval number 20/KEPK/USU/2025. All procedures adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Before participation, students and their guardians were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the confidentiality of their responses. Written informed consent was obtained from the students, and parental consent was secured where required. The researchers ensured that all participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. No identifying information was collected to protect privacy, and all responses were anonymized during data entry and analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study based on the analysis of data collected from 106 female students at SMP Negeri 31 Medan. The results are organized according to participant demographics, sources of information on sexual abuse, prevalence of personal experiences with abuse, and levels of knowledge about different forms of sexual abuse. Using univariate descriptive analysis allows for a comprehensive overview of the respondent profiles and key study variables.

Table 1. Respondent characteristics.

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Age		
12	36	33.96
13	36	33.96
14	32	30.19
15	2	1.89
Class		
VII	43	40.57
VIII	37	34.91
IX	26	24.53
Have you ever received information about sexual abuse		
Yes	85	80.19
No	21	19.81
Source information		
News	7	7.07
Social environment, social media	1	1.01

Characteristics	Frequency	%
Social media	13	13.13
Parents	28	28.28
Parents, social media	1	1.01
Parents, school	1	1.01
Parents, School, Friends	5	5.05
Parents, School, Friends, Social media	3	3.03
Parents, School, Friends, Social media, news	1	1.01
Parents, Friends	7	7.07
Parents, Friends, Social media	7	7.07
School	10	10.10
School, News	1	1.01
School, Social media	1	1.01
Friends	13	13.13
Have experienced acts of sexual abuse		
Yes	23	21.70
No	83	78.30

Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents were 12 years old, with 36 people (33.96%), 13-year-old respondents totaled 36 people (33.96%), while those aged 14 years totaled 32 people (30.19%). A small proportion of respondents aged 15 years were two people (1.89%), with the majority of respondents coming from class VII with 43 people (40.57%), class VIII, as many as 37 people (34.91%), and class IX, as many as 26 people (24.53%). Most respondents have received information about sexual abuse, namely 85 people (80.19%). Those who have never received information are 21 people (19.81%), with most of the sources of information coming from parents, namely 28 people (28.28%) then continued with sources from social media, namely 13 people (13.13%), the same number of friends, namely 13 people (13.13%), from schools as many as 10 people (10.10%), and from news as many as seven people (7.07%). The rest got information from more than one source. Of experiencing sexual abuse, most respondents have never experienced this, namely 83 people (78.30%), and those who have experienced it are as many as 23 people (21.70%).

Table 2. Frequency and percentage distribution of adolescents' knowledge of sexual abuse.

Adolescents' Knowledge of Sexual Abuse	Frequency	%
Less	0	0
Enough	22	20.8
Good	84	79.2
Total	106	100

Table 2 shows that 84 adolescents had good knowledge (79.2%), and 22 adolescents had fair knowledge (20.8%).

Table 3. Frequency and percentage distribution of adolescents' knowledge about the form of sexual abuse.

Adolescents' knowledge about forms of sexual abuse	Frequency	%
Less	3	2.8
Enough	27	25.5
Good	76	71.7
Total	106	100

Table 3 showed that 76 adolescents (71.1%) had good knowledge, 27 (25.5%) had enough knowledge, and 3 (2.8%) had less knowledge.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage distribution of adolescents' knowledge about the prevention of sexual abuse.

Adolescents' Knowledge about Preventing Sexual Abuse	Frequency	%
Less	2	1.9
Enough	18	17.0
Good	86	81.1
Total	106	100

Table 4 showed that the majority of respondents had good knowledge of sexual violence prevention, with 86 respondents (81.1%) having good knowledge, 18 respondents (17%) having enough knowledge, and two respondents (1.9%) having less knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The majority of students demonstrated a good level of knowledge regarding sexual abuse, with 79.2% scoring in the upper category. This showed that most students already had a good understanding of sexual harassment. Education and awareness-raising about sexual abuse, whether through schools, families, or the media, has had a positive impact on improving students' knowledge. There are still 20.8% of students whose knowledge is only adequate. This indicates that there is room for further improvement in education, especially in deepening the understanding of certain aspects that may still be lacking in some students. This outcome is consistent with studies by Mathew et al. (2022), which reported that adolescents who receive structured education combined with informal exposure to related topics, such as through conversations with family or media content, develop a comprehensive

understanding of the nature and types of sexual abuse. These findings support that the quality and diversity of informational sources accessible to adolescents heavily influence knowledge acquisition. This is based on research, only about 41.3% of adolescents demonstrated correct knowledge of sexual abuse, with even lower awareness among those who had experienced abuse themselves. This suggests that many adolescents are not fully equipped to recognize or respond to abuse situations (Odigwe et al., 2021). Adolescents' understanding of sexual abuse remains insufficient, contributing to underreporting and increased vulnerability. Comprehensive education and strong family support are essential to improve knowledge, prevention, and intervention outcomes (Meydan & Finkelhor, 2020).

Despite the high percentage of students with sound knowledge, there are critical gaps in the dissemination and accessibility of such information. Only 10.10% of students cited schools as their primary source of knowledge. The high level of knowledge among most students risks causing knowledge bias due to inequitable access to and quality of information. Biased knowledge can limit students' ability to recognise and deal with all forms of sexual abuse, as well as reduce the effectiveness of prevention efforts at the community level. Therefore, a more comprehensive, balanced, and accessible education strategy is needed for all students. This contrasts with the recommendations from WHO (2020), which emphasize the pivotal role of educational institutions in shaping adolescents' understanding of abuse, consent, and prevention. The relative absence of school-based education in this domain points to systemic inadequacies in curriculum integration and teacher preparedness, reflecting broader national challenges (Mulya et al., 2021). Barriers to disclosure and prevention include limited support, fear, shame, and lack of developmentally appropriate information. School-based programs that address these barriers can facilitate disclosure and prevention (Lemaigre & Gittoes, 2017). Effective prevention requires inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and participatory programs involving educators, parents, and caregivers, especially for vulnerable groups such as sexual and gender diverse youth (Weir et al., 2025).

Adolescents' knowledge about the forms and prevention of sexual violence is good. This was according to research conducted by Arulmohi et al. (2017) on adolescent girls, which found that education was effective in increasing adolescent girls' knowledge about sexual violence and their skills in preventing violence. This was supported by Hu et al. (2023), which found that education about sexual violence was proven to be effective in increasing adolescents' knowledge about the forms of sexual violence and students' attitudes towards violence prevention.

Parents emerged as the most common source of information on sexual abuse, as cited by 28.28% of respondents. This finding aligns with prior research by Suhariyati & Oktavianti (2024), which emphasized the significance of parental engagement in enhancing adolescents' cognitive and emotional resilience against abuse. Conversations within the family setting often allow for personalized, repeated, and emotionally supportive learning, making them particularly effective. Nonetheless, the reliance on parents also poses challenges, particularly in communities where cultural taboos or limited knowledge prevent open discussions about sexuality and abuse. Childhood abuse has direct and indirect effects on

depression, and psychological resilience and school connectedness serve as important mediators in this relationship (Yang et al., 2022). Supportive and engaged parenting is a decisive protective factor for adolescent resilience against abuse, primarily by fostering self-esteem and providing emotional support. However, resilience is complex and multidimensional, and not all forms of parental engagement are beneficial. Negative or abusive behaviors can undermine resilience, emphasizing the need for comprehensive family and community interventions (Kassis et al., 2022).

The influence of social media and peer interaction, each accounting for 13.13% of responses, also warrants attention. Digital platforms have become central in the lives of adolescents, serving as both information sources and social environments. Studies by Rahman & Primanita (2022) have shown that peer-based learning and digital storytelling can significantly enhance awareness of verbal and non-verbal forms of abuse. However, the accuracy and reliability of information obtained from such informal sources remain variable, often requiring cross-verification with authoritative educational content.

The gap between knowledge and real-life experience is a noteworthy aspect of the findings. As shown in Table 1, 21.70% of respondents reported having experienced some form of sexual abuse, despite the majority having good knowledge. This pattern echoes earlier observations by Rusyidi et al. (2019) and Hafizah et al. (2024), who highlighted that knowledge, while crucial, does not necessarily translate into protective behavior. Adolescents may know what constitutes abuse but feel powerless to act due to fear, shame, or the perceived inaccessibility of support mechanisms. These psychosocial barriers can prevent victims from recognizing, resisting, or reporting abuse, especially when the perpetrator is someone known or holds authority.

Another possible explanation for this disconnect lies in the type of knowledge being conveyed. The present study did not differentiate between theoretical knowledge (i.e., knowing definitions and examples) and practical knowledge (i.e., knowing how to act when confronted with abuse). Prior research by Mathew et al. (2022) suggested that scenario-based learning and role-play exercises enhance the ability of students to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. Therefore, while the current findings reflect high knowledge levels, they also underscore the need for more applied educational models.

Although the questionnaire used in this study assessed general knowledge of sexual abuse, evidence from the literature indicates that adolescents' understanding often varies depending on the form of abuse. For instance, Wafa et al. (2023) and Hafizah et al. (2024) both found that physical abuse is more readily recognized than verbal or non-verbal abuse. Adolescents may fail to identify subtle forms of abuse, such as lewd stares, inappropriate jokes, or controlling behavior, particularly if these actions are normalized within their peer groups or communities.

This differentiated recognition is critical because many instances of sexual abuse begin with minor, often overlooked behaviors. Early detection and response to such cues can prevent escalation. However, if adolescents are not trained to recognize these early warning signs, even good overall

knowledge may be insufficient. The implication is that educational content must be tailored not only to define abuse but to contextualize it in ways that reflect adolescents' lived realities.

The findings also suggest structural limitations within the school environment. With only a small fraction of respondents identifying schools as their primary source of information, the study adds empirical weight to claims by Putri et al. (2024) and Mulya et al. (2021) regarding the lack of structured sexual education in Indonesian curricula. Institutional reluctance to address sensitive topics, compounded by the absence of trained educators and supportive policies, creates a vacuum in which adolescents must rely on inconsistent and sometimes unreliable sources.

Moreover, the presence of abuse within educational institutions, as documented by William (2022), raises serious questions about the efficacy of existing safeguarding measures. When abuse occurs within the very environment that is supposed to protect and educate, the trust necessary for effective knowledge transfer is compromised. Schools must not only educate but also model ethical behavior and establish clear, accessible pathways for reporting and intervention.

The demographic distribution shows that most participants were between 12 and 14 years old, a stage classified as early adolescence. This developmental window is marked by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social changes, which influence how adolescents process and internalize information. According to Azrina et al. (2024) and the World Health Organization (2020), this stage is particularly sensitive, making timely and developmentally appropriate interventions crucial. Younger adolescents may possess only nascent critical thinking skills and thus require more structured guidance, whereas older adolescents might benefit from dialogical and participatory approaches.

The narrow age range represented in the study offers both strengths and limitations. While it allows for focused analysis of a high-risk group, it also limits generalizability to older adolescents, who may have different informational needs and behavioral responses. Future studies should consider longitudinal designs that track changes in knowledge and behavior over time, accounting for maturation and cumulative exposure to educational interventions.

The combined findings of this study suggest that while informal knowledge channels play a critical role in shaping adolescent awareness, formal institutions must take a more proactive stance. Schools should be equipped with evidence-based curricula that are age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and inclusive of both theory and practice. Teacher training is essential, not only in content delivery but also in emotional support and trauma-informed responses.

Policy frameworks must also evolve to support these changes. National education policies should mandate comprehensive sexuality education as part of core curricula, consistent with global standards. Additionally, mechanisms for confidential reporting and psychological support must be strengthened within schools. Collaboration between educators, health professionals, families, and community leaders is necessary to create a protective ecosystem that empowers adolescents with the knowledge and the capacity to act.

LIMITATION

This study provides important insights into adolescents' understanding of sexual violence, but it has several limitations. The study was only conducted at one public junior high school in Medan, so the results cannot be generalized to other areas. Cultural variations, school infrastructure, and societal norms in Indonesia may influence the findings. The research instruments only measure factual knowledge, not its application in real-life situations. Awareness does not necessarily lead to action due to emotional or social barriers. A cross-sectional approach cannot track long-term changes. Further research is recommended using longitudinal methods and qualitative interviews.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that most female adolescents at SMP Negeri 31 Medan had good knowledge about sexual violence. However, there were still some students whose knowledge was sufficient or lacking, making this group vulnerable to sexual violence. The findings indicate the importance of educating students on how to recognize and report sexual violence. Schools need to strengthen comprehensive sexuality education and teacher training so that material on sexual violence prevention can be delivered appropriately. In addition, parents and the community must be actively involved, and schools must provide an easy reporting mechanism and psychological support for students.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Prilda Roulyna Napitua: Conducted the research and compiled the research findings.

Dina Rasmita: Provided input on the research, contributed to the compilation of the research findings, and prepared the manuscripts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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