

# Experience of Loneliness among School Children: A comparative study in the selected South-Asian countries

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## ABSTRACT

Feeling of loneliness will happen when an individual's socio-emotional needs are not being adequately met. This study assessed the experiences of loneliness of 11-16 year old school children in selected South-Asian countries. Data drawn from Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) which is a school-based survey conducted among students aged 11–17 years by World Health Organization (WHO) during 2007-2009. This paper focused only on selected South-Asia countries' sample students such as India (8075), Indonesia (3110), Maldives (3157), Myanmar (2789), Sri Lanka (2602) and Thailand (2762). This analysis found that a significant portion of school students in all the study South-Asian countries do in fact experience feeling of loneliness, however, these proportions are very widely among the study groups. Similarly a small but significant proportion of students in the study countries felt sad or hopeless in the past one year. With respect to their attempt to consider suicide, Myanmar and Indonesia students are mentally so strong than Maldives and Sri Lankan students. It can be concluded that loneliness is a significant problem that can predispose young children to immediate and long-term negative consequences. Therefore, it is important to recognize lonely individuals early on to prevent more serious social, emotional and health and well-being problems which loneliness may cause.

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## 1. Background

Being socially isolated is not synonymous with being lonely. However, there will often be a correlation between social isolation and loneliness. People with few contacts are more often lonelier than people with many contacts (Meeuwesen, Hortulanus and Machielse, 2001; Halvorsen, 2005). Loneliness may serve as an important, overlooked pre-disease pathway for a range of health outcomes in adulthood (Goosby, Bellatorre, Walsemann and Cheadle, 2013). Adolescence is a particularly salient time for understanding the health consequences of loneliness because youth are experiencing various developmental transitions, from biological (pubertal onset) to social (transitioning from primary to secondary school). During this developmental stage, youth are also transitioning from their parents to their friends as primary socializing agents (Crosnoe 2000).

Umberson and Montez (2010) stated that such a myriad of transitions can lead to both friendship instability and emotional distress, which could lead to a cascade of health risks over time. Social ties are salient for life course health. For adolescents specifically, both attachment to school and parental support may be key protective factors for mental and physical health during a developmental period when distress is high (Resnick et al. 1997; Giordano 2003). Hence, it is important to identify lonely individuals early on to prevent more serious social, emotional and health and well-being problems which loneliness may cause. With this backdrop, in this paper an attempt was made to understand the prevalence of loneliness among the school students in the selected South-Asian countries.

## 2. Methods

This study utilizes the data from Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS). It is a school-based survey conducted among students aged 11–17 years by World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with United Nations' UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNAIDS. Around the world, totally 55 countries have involved in GSHS during 2007-2009, however, this paper focused only on selected South-Asia countries' sample students such as India (8075), Indonesia (3110), Maldives (3157), Myanmar (2789), Sri Lanka (2602) and Thailand (2762). The information on mental health was assessed based on self-rated mental health condition.

## 3. Demographic Conditions

A considerable proportion of sample students' age was 13 or less than years in all the study countries except Maldives. It ranges from 30.1 percent in Myanmar to 47.4 percent in Thailand. The age distribution of sample students' population was more or less similar in Sri Lanka and Thailand. The proportion of sample students in the age category 15 and above 15 years was more than sixty percent in Maldives (65.0 percent), and above forty percent in Myanmar (47.4 percent). This sharing proportion was more or less equal in Indonesia (19.9 percent), Thailand (21.1 percent) and in Sri Lanka (23.2 percent). In India, the sharing of sample student in different age group was almost one-third in each category. Chi-square results show significant association between the age of the students and study countries ( $\chi^2=2405.474$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ).

While looking the male and female share of the sample students' population, the female exceeds the male in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. On contrast, in India, the male share was slightly higher than female share (55.7 and 44.3 percent respectively). Almost equal proportion of male

and female students were enumerated in Myanmar and Thailand survey. Statistical analysis shows a significant

association between the sex of the study population and study countries ( $\chi^2=179.469, p <0.000$ ).

**Table 1: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students by their Demographic characteristics across the selected South-Asian Countries**

Demographic characteristics	India	Indonesia	Maldives	Myanmar	Sri Lanka	Thailand
<b>Age*** 2405.474</b>						
>13	33.0	39.8	9.8	30.1	44.4	47.4
14	32.9	40.3	25.2	22.5	32.4	31.5
<15	34.1	19.9	65.0	47.4	23.2	21.1
<b>Sex*** 179.469</b>						
Male	55.7	47.7	45.3	49.8	43.7	49.4
Female	44.3	52.3	54.7	50.2	56.3	50.6
<b>No. of Close Friends *** 2426.310</b>						
No close Friend	11.1	1.5	9.3	3.5	5.8	3.4
1-2 Friends	47.1	14.0	34.2	25.3	35.5	19.9
3 and more Friends	41.8	84.5	56.5	71.2	58.7	76.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>8075</b>	<b>3110</b>	<b>3157</b>	<b>2789</b>	<b>2602</b>	<b>2762</b>

During the GSHS, the students were asked to report their number of close friends. It is evident from the table that a higher proportion of Indonesia students had more than three friends (84.5 percent) among the study countries. The next highest proportion is noticed among Thailand students (76.6 percent) followed by Myanmar students (71.2 percent). This

proportion is quite low among Indian students (41.8 percent). Maldives and Sri Lanka students were more or less equally had three or more close friends (56.5 percent and 58.7 percent respectively). It is found that there is statistically significant association between the number of close friends and the study countries ( $\chi^2=2426.310, p <0.000$ ).

**Table 2: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who felt lonely in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries**

Felt Lonely in the past 12 Months	India	Indonesia	Maldives	Myanmar	Sri Lanka	Thailand
Never	35.0	26.1	36.3	56.3	38.9	34.2
Rarely/ Sometimes	56.3	65.0	47.9	39.3	53.8	58.0
Most of the Times / Always	8.7	8.9	15.8	4.4	7.3	7.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>8062</b>	<b>3095</b>	<b>3152</b>	<b>2797</b>	<b>2571</b>	<b>2762</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =857.506; d.f.=10; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>						

**4. Results**

Global School-based Student Health Survey data reveals that most of the sample students in all the study countries felt lonely during the past 12 months, it ranges from 73.9 percent among Indonesia students to 43.7 percent among Myanmar students. The proportion of students who felt very lonely (most of the time or always) during the past 12 months was as high as 15.8 percent among Maldives students and Myanmar students reported the lowest proportion (4.4 percent) among the study countries. In India and Indonesia, this proportion was around 9 percent and in Thailand 7.9 percent of students reported feeling of very lonely during the past 12 months. It can be concluded that a substantial proportion of students are felt

loneliness during the past 12 months in all the South-Asian study countries (except Myanmar). Chi-square results show significant association between the feeling of loneliness and study countries ( $\chi^2=587.506; p <0.000$ ).

On contrary, the proportion of students who felt so secured (never felt loneliness) was high among the male than the females irrespective of all the study countries except in Myanmar. However, this proportion was ranged from 31.8 percent for Indonesia male students to 41.0 percent for Maldives male students. Conversely in Myanmar a higher proportion of female students reported, more secured (57.1 percent) than the male students (55.4 percent).

**Table 3: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who felt lonely in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries by Sex**

Felt Lonely in the past 12 Months		India	Indonesia	Maldives	Myanmar	Sri Lanka	Thailand
Male	Never	37.2	31.8	41.0	55.4	38.8	40.0
	Rarely/ Sometimes	55.1	61.2	44.4	40.1	53.5	52.2
	Most of the Times / Always	7.7	7.0	14.7	4.5	7.7	7.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4448</b>	<b>1468</b>	<b>1418</b>	<b>1393</b>	<b>1115</b>	<b>1361</b>
<b>Chi-square Value = 304.931; d.f.=10; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>							
Female	Never	32.4	21.0	32.3	57.1	39.1	28.5
	Rarely/ Sometimes	57.7	68.4	51.1	38.6	54.0	63.6
	Most of the Times / Always	9.9	10.6	16.7	4.3	6.9	7.9

<b>Total</b>	<b>3534</b>	<b>1614</b>	<b>1714</b>	<b>1402</b>	<b>1440</b>	<b>1395</b>
<b>Chi-square Value = 617.460; d.f.=10; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>						

A slight male and female differences with respect to feel very loneliness was witnessed among Indonesia students (7.0 and 10.6 percent respectively) and Maldives students (14.7 and 16.7 percent respectively). A similar difference noticed among Indian students (7.7 and 9.9 percent respectively). On the other hand, male students were not significantly different from female students to feel very lonely (most of the time or always) in Thailand (7.7 percent and 7.9 percent respectively) and in Myanmar (4.5 and 4.3 percent respectively). It is found from the analysis that there is statistically significant difference between the feeling of loneliness of the male students and

study countries ( $\chi^2=304.931$ ;  $p<0.000$ ). A similar association was noticed among female students ( $\chi^2=614.460$ ;  $p<0.000$ ).

During the survey, the students were asked to response on 'how often have you been so worried about something that you could not sleep at night during the past 12 months'. A significant proportion of students in all the study countries (except in Myanmar and Sri Lanka) felt so worried about something that they could not sleep at night during the past 12 months. This percentage ranges from 70.6 percent for Indonesia to 62.1 percent for Maldives.

**Table 4: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who could not sleep in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries**

Could not Sleep in the past 12 Months	India	Indonesia	Maldives	Myanmar	Sri Lanka	Thailand
Never	34.7	29.4	37.9	63.3	52.6	34.8
Rarely/ Sometimes	57.6	62.8	47.0	34.2	42.5	58.5
Most of the Times / Always	7.7	7.8	15.1	2.4	4.9	6.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>8079</b>	<b>3100</b>	<b>3167</b>	<b>2793</b>	<b>2600</b>	<b>2756</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =1371.058; d.f.=10; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>						

About 15 percent of the Maldives students reported that most of the times or always they felt so worried about something and they could not sleep at night during the past 12 months. This proportion was around seven for Indonesia (7.8 percent), India (7.7 percent) and Thailand students (6.7 percent). Chi-square results show significant association between the feeling of so sad and study countries ( $\chi^2=1371.058$ ;  $p<0.000$ ).

they cannot sleep at night in Thailand (6.7 and 6.8 percent respectively) and Sri Lanka (4.8 and 5.0 percent respectively). On contrary, in Maldives, male students (12.7 percent) were significantly different from female students (16.8 percent) to felt so worried about something that they could not sleep at night. A moderate differences is noticed among male and female Indian students (7.0 and 8.3 percent respectively) with respect to felt so worried about something in the past 12 months.

Male students and female students were equally likely to most of the time or always felt so worried about something and

**Table 5: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who could not sleep in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries by Sex**

Could not Sleep in the past 12 Months		India	Indonesia	Maldives	Myanmar	Sri Lanka	Thailand
Male	Never	37.1	32.8	45.0	61.7	51.0	38.5
	Rarely/ Sometimes	55.9	59.6	42.3	35.3	44.2	54.8
	Most of the Times / Always	7.0	7.6	12.7	2.9	4.8	6.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4452</b>	<b>1470</b>	<b>1413</b>	<b>1390</b>	<b>1128</b>	<b>1355</b>
<b>Chi-square Value = 461.995; d.f.=10; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>							
Female	Never	31.8	26.3	32.1	65.0	54.0	31.2
	Rarely/ Sometimes	59.9	65.6	51.1	33.2	41.0	62.0
	Most of the Times / Always	8.3	8.1	16.8	1.9	5.0	6.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3548</b>	<b>1617</b>	<b>1735</b>	<b>1401</b>	<b>1453</b>	<b>1395</b>
<b>Chi-square Value = 982.640; d.f.=10; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>							

It can be concluded that the proportion of students who spelt well at night in the past 12 months was reasonably higher for male students than the female students in all the study countries except in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. It is found from

the Chi-square analysis that the association between the students' feeling of so worried and the study countries is statistically significant among male ( $\chi^2=461.995$ ,  $p <0.000$ ) and female students ( $\chi^2=982.640$ ,  $p <0.000$ ).

**Table 6: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who Sad or Hopeless in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries**

Sad or Hopeless in the past 12 Months	India	Indonesia	Maldives	Myanmar	Sri Lanka	Thailand
Yes	25.2	22.4	NA	16.9	32.2	16.7
No	74.8	77.6	NA	83.1	67.8	83.3

<b>Total</b>	<b>7982</b>	<b>3103</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>2801</b>	<b>2549</b>	<b>2677</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =302.705; d.f.=5; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000 (NA=Not Available)</b>						

Of the 7,982 Indian students who response to ‘During the past 12 months, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that stopped doing your usual activities?, one-fourth of them felt so sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more and they stopped doing their usual activities during the past 12 months. This proportion was as high as in Sri Lanka among the study

countries (32.2 percent). On the other side, just 17 percent of Thailand and Myanmar students were reported that they felt so sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more and they stopped doing their usual activities during the past 12 months. Chi-square analysis shows that the association between the students’ sad or hopeless feelings and the study countries is statistically significant ( $\chi^2=302.705, p <0.000$ ).

**Table 7: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who Sad or Hopeless in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries by Sex**

<b>Sad or Hopeless in the past 12 Months</b>		<b>India</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Maldives</b>	<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>Sri Lanka</b>	<b>Thailand</b>
<b>Male</b>	Yes	26.1	21.3	NA	17.4	33.7	18.0
	No	73.9	78.7	NA	82.6	66.3	82.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4409</b>	<b>1473</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>1393</b>	<b>1099</b>	<b>1298</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =158.907; d.f.=5; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>							
<b>Female</b>	Yes	24.2	23.6	NA	16.4	31.0	15.4
	No	75.8	76.4	NA	83.6	69.0	84.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3495</b>	<b>1617</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>1406</b>	<b>1436</b>	<b>1374</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =149.682; d.f.=5; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000 (NA=Not Available)</b>							

Male students are significantly more likely than female students to feel so sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more and they stopped doing their usual activities in all the South Asian Countries except Indonesia. In Indonesia, male students (21.3 percent) are significantly less likely than female students (23.6 percent) to feel lonely most of the time or always.

more so sad or hopeless and they stopped doing their usual activities than girls students (31.0 percent) and this proportion is lowest among Thailand students (18.0 and 15.4 percent respectively). It is found from the Chi-square analysis that the association between the students’ feeling of so sad and the study countries is statistically significant among male ( $\chi^2=158.907, p <0.000$ ) and female students ( $\chi^2=149.682, p <0.000$ ).

Among the study South Asian countries, a higher proportion of Sri Lankan male students (33.7 percent) reported

**Table 8: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who seriously ever considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries**

<b>Seriously ever considered attempting suicide</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Maldives</b>	<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>Sri Lanka</b>	<b>Thailand</b>
Yes	NA	4.7	18.4	1.1	10.3	8.6
No	NA	95.3	81.6	98.9	89.7	91.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>3103</b>	<b>2990</b>	<b>2805</b>	<b>2541</b>	<b>2727</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =776.768; d.f.=4; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000 (NA=Not Available)</b>						

During the survey, the students were asked to report that whether they ever seriously consider attempting suicide in the past 12 months. Data reveals that as high as 18.4 percent of Maldives students were seriously considered attempting suicide during the past 12 months. The next highest proportion in this category is noticed among Sri Lankan students (10.3 percent). In Thailand, around nine percent of students seriously considered attempting suicide during the past 12 months (8.6 percent). On the other sides, overwhelming

majority of the Myanmar students were never consider attempting suicide (98.9 percent) in the past 12 months. It can be observed from the analysis that Myanmar and Indonesia students are more likely mentally strong than the counterparts’ country students. In India, this information was not collected during the survey. Chi-square results show significant association between the students’ consider attempting suicide and study countries ( $\chi^2=776.768; p <0.000$ ).

**Table 9: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who seriously ever considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries by Sex**

<b>Seriously ever considered attempting suicide in the past 12 Months</b>		<b>India</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>	<b>Maldives</b>	<b>Myanmar</b>	<b>Sri Lanka</b>	<b>Thailand</b>
<b>Male</b>	Yes	NA	4.1	20.1	0.9	11.2	9.7
	No	NA	95.9	79.9	99.1	88.8	90.3
	<b>Total</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>1472</b>	<b>1337</b>	<b>1395</b>	<b>1096</b>	<b>1326</b>

<b>Chi-square Value =365.053; d.f.=4; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000</b>							
Female	Yes	NA	5.4	20.9	1.2	9.3	7.5
	No	NA	94.6	79.1	98.8	90.7	92.5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>1619</b>	<b>1644</b>	<b>1408</b>	<b>1434</b>	<b>1395</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =411.544; d.f.=4; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000 (NA=Not Available)</b>							

In Maldives, about one-fifth of the male and female students were equally likely to seriously consider attempting suicide in the past 12 months (20.1 and 20.9 percent respectively). Whereas, in Sri Lanka, male students (11.2 percent) were significantly more likely than female students (9.3 percent) to seriously consider attempting suicide in the past 12 months. A similar pattern is noticed among Thailand students (9.7 and 7.5 percent). On the other hand, in Indonesia

male students (4.1 percent) were not significantly differ from female students (5.4 percent) to seriously consider attempting suicide in the past 12 months. It is found from the bi-variate analysis that there is statistically significant difference between the consider suicide attempt of the male students and study countries ( $\chi^2=365.053$ ;  $p<0.000$ ). A similar association noticed among female students ( $\chi^2=411.544$ ;  $p<0.000$ ).

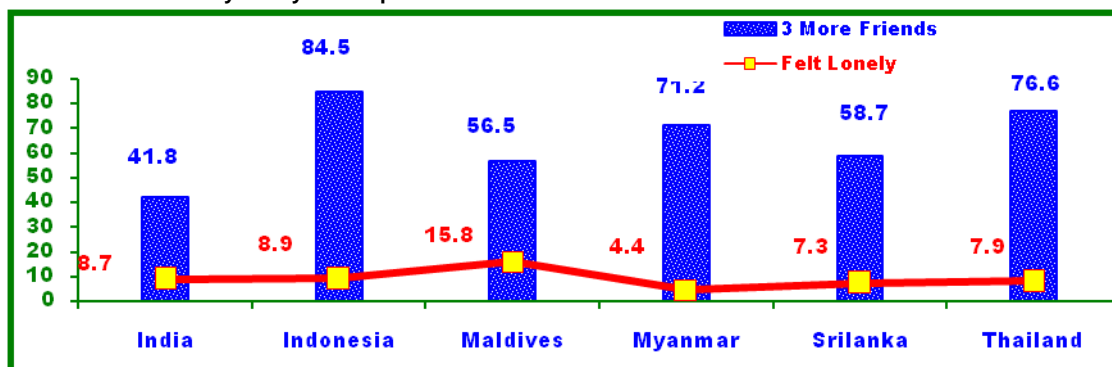
**Table 10: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students who made suicide plan in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries**

Made a plan about how they would attempt suicide	India	Indonesia	Maldives	Myanmar	Sri Lanka	Thailand
Yes	NA	3.7	20.6	0.2	13.5	10.0
No	NA	96.3	79.4	99.8	86.5	90.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>3081</b>	<b>3227</b>	<b>2804</b>	<b>2558</b>	<b>2715</b>
<b>Chi-square Value =479.206; d.f.=4; Level of Sig. = p&lt;0.000 (NA=Not Available)</b>						

During the GSHS, the students were asked during the past 12 months, 'Did you make a plan about how you would attempt suicide?' and the students' responses are tabulated in table 10. It is noticed from the above table that about one-fifth of Maldives students made a plan about attempt suicide during the past 12 months. The next highest proportion of students made a plan about attempt suicide during the past 12 months

was noticed in Sri Lanka (13.5 percent) followed by Thailand (10.0 percent). In Myanmar, an insignificant proportion of students made a plan about attempt suicide during the past 12 months. Chi-square analysis shows that the association between the students' plan about attempt suicide and the study countries is statistically significant ( $\chi^2=479.206$ ,  $p <0.000$ ).

**Figure 1: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students by Frequency of Three and more number of close friends with Students who felt very lonely\* in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries**



\*Very lonely= most of the time or always feel lonely

The association between the proportion of students' feeling on loneliness and having number of close friends is witnessed from the below diagram. In Indonesia a significant negative association is noticed between the feeling of loneliness and having number of close friends among students. While the percentage of students who had more than three close friends was reaches the highest value, the proportion of reporting feeling very lonely was low (84.5 percent and 8.9 percent respectively).

Whereas in Maldives, the proportion of students who had three and more than three friends was 56.5 percent and their loneliness proportion was around 16 percent. It can be

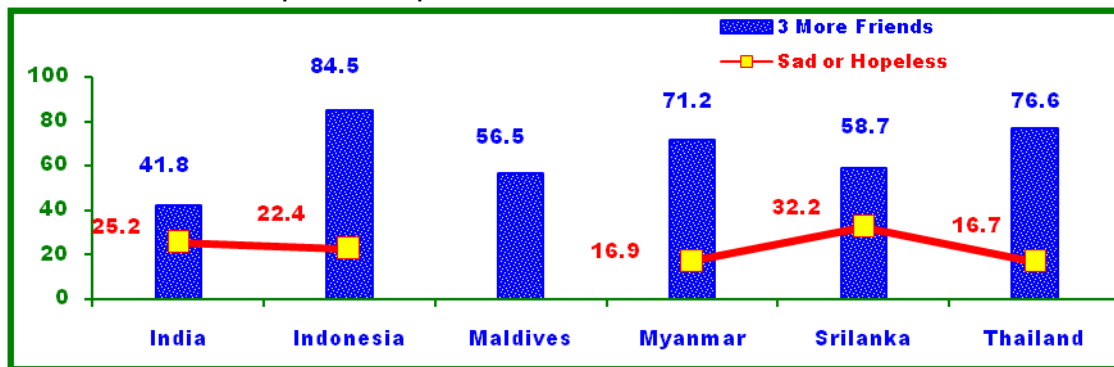
concluded from these two countries' observation (Indonesia and Maldives) that the students who had the higher number of close friends, their feeling of loneliness was low.

It is also evident from the diagram that in Myanmar and Thailand the proportion of students who had more than three close friends was 71.2 and 76.6 percent respectively and correspondingly their percentage of reporting 'very loneliness' was 4.4 and 7.9 percent. Out of 8,083 students in India, around forty percent of them had more than three close friends (41.8 percent) and about 8.7 percent of the sample Indian students reported that they felt very loneliness in the past 12 months.

The relationship between the students' feel so sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more and stopped doing

their usual activities and having number of close friends among the study countries are explained in diagram 2.

**Figure 2: Percentage Distribution of the Sample Students by Frequency of Three and more number of close friends with Students who felt so sad or hopeless in the past 12 months across the selected South-Asian Countries**



It is evident from the diagram that there is a significant negative association between the feelings of so sad/hopeless and stopped their usual activities with their number of close friends. While their proportion of having more than three close friends increases, their reporting of sad/hopeless percentage was decreases. In Myanmar and Thailand the proportion of students who had more than three close friends was 71.2 and 76.6 percent respectively and correspondingly their percentage of reporting 'sad/hopeless' was 16.9 and 16.7 percent. Whereas the proportion of having more than three close friends decrease to 58.7 percent in Sri Lanka, the percentage of reporting 'sad/hopeless' was increased to 32.2 percent.

## 5. Conclusion

This analysis found that a significant portion of school students in all the study South-Asian countries do in fact experience feeling of loneliness, however, this proportions are vary widely among the study groups. Similarly a small but significant proportion of students in the study countries felt sad or hopeless in the past one year. With respect to their attempt consider on suicide, Myanmar and Indonesia students are mentally so strong than Maldives and Sri Lankan students. It can be concluded that the loneliness is a significant problem that can predispose young children to immediate and long-term negative consequences. Therefore, it is important to recognise lonely individuals early on to prevent more serious social, emotional and health and well-being problems which loneliness may cause.

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