

Girl Child Sexual Abuse in Lusaka Urban

by

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ABSTRACT

The study on girl child sexual abuse and whose findings are presented in this article was conducted in 2010 as an academic requirement for the purpose of completing a Master's degree in Gender Studies at the University of Zambia.

This article outlines issues of sexual abuse and the various reasons why under-age girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, cultural beliefs with regard to sexual abuse, gender and power relations and sexual abuse, and existing community programmes and knowledge levels, and institutional mechanisms of the sexual abuse case reporting in Lusaka urban. The article has drawn conclusions and recommendations for enhancing the protection of the children against child sexual abuse. By conducting a study that comprehensively assesses the types of programmes and perceived implementation gaps from Lusaka, this report poses specific policy and structural recommendations on how best to address the existing problem of increased vulnerability of under-age girls to sexual abuse.

Child sexual abuse is a form of abuse in which a child is abused for the sexual gratification of an adult or older adolescent (CHIN, 2005: 53). Child sexual abuse is the actual or the likely sexual exploitation of a child and includes rape, incest and all forms of sexual activity (VSO, 2008: 2). In Zambia, anyone under the age of sixteen is classified as a child.

Researchers cite various reasons why child sexual abuse is so common: Gender power relations (patriarchy views which place women and children in lower positions), poverty, a legacy of violent homes, power relations between children and adults, and cultural beliefs.

The research was an exploratory study undertaken in Lusaka urban and endeavored to explore why the problem of sexual abuse was persistent and why under-age children were vulnerable to it. Using purposive and simple random sampling, a sample size of seventy was arrived at and both qualitative and quantitative approaches of research were employed. The data was then analysed manually and by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

The institutions visited were: Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare, Women and Law in Southern Africa Trust, The Child Protection Unit of the Zambia Police Service, Young Women Christian Association, Isubilo Orphanage and Drop-in Centre and Jesus Cares Ministries Orphanage. Additionally, community members from Chawama, Mtendere and Kabwata compounds were interviewed for more insight into the study.

The study results showed that under-age girl-children were more vulnerable to sexual abuse because they were easy to coerce, threaten, lure and could be more trusting than much older girls. Further, the study revealed that gender-power relations, power relations between children and adults, cultural beliefs and community programmes on sexual abuse played a role in girl child sexual abuse.

The overall study recommendations were coined from the outcomes and conclusions made in the study as follows: children needed more focused education to increase their knowledge about child sexual abuse; intensify funding injections into already functional community and school programmes, for example the School Liaison Programme under the Zambia Police Service; putting in place a holistic approach to sensitise community members centring on encroaching cultural norms and practices that perpetrate child sexual abuse; there was need to intensify and widen the coverage of programmes on child sexual abuse clearly stipulating and defining types of sexual abuse; the law and punishment for perpetrators; perceived gaps in the awareness programmes and institutional mechanism for sexual abuse case reporting was bureaucratically long, long court procedures and negative cultural doctrines also played a role and as such needed attention.

INTRODUCTION

There are many forms of child abuse and they include: sexual, emotional, physical abuse and neglect. Child abuse can be caused by a lot of factors and can take place both within the context of the family and in the context of other agencies and carers (VSO, 2008: 2). The World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children, agreed to, at the World Summit for Children in September 1990, that the time of childhood should be one of joy and peace, of playing, learning and growing (UNICEF, 2005: 50).

However, it is also observed that for many children, the reality of childhood is all different. Each day, countless children around the world are exposed to dangers that hamper their growth and development. They suffer immensely as casualties of war and violence, scourges of poverty and economic crises, as victims of HIV and AIDS, racial discrimination, as refugees and displaced persons, as victims of neglect, cruelty and exploitation (UNICEF, 2005).

As if that is not enough, the girl child of Zambia suffers sexual abuse which breeds a number of negative effects on her life, including emotional, psychological, social and increases the risk for unwanted pregnancies and contraction of HIV. These effects of child sexual abuse can be devastating. In many cases they result in depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, propensity to re-victimisation in adulthood and physical injury to the child, among other problems. Sexual abuse by a family member is a form of incest and can result in more serious and long-term psychological trauma, especially in the case of parental incest.

According to United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (2005), child abuse occurs in most parts of the world including Zambia. Sexual abuse occurs

in rural, urban and suburban areas and among all ethnic, racial and socioeconomic groups (National Research Council of Washington, 1993: 8). According to a report by Children In Need Network (CHIN, 2005: 63), child abuse is any wilful act designed to harm the physical or emotional well-being of a child. A child according to the Voluntary Service Overseas Zambia Child Protection Policy (2008: 1), in Zambia, anyone under the age of sixteen is classified as a child. Child abuse usually occurs as a result of misuse of power to the detriment of children. There are so many under-age girls that suffer at the hands of the different forms of sexual abuse.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Zambia, one in every thirteen to eighteen children is likely to experience some form of sexual abuse and that female children are more at risk of sexual abuse making up 72 per cent of the abused children compared to 28 per cent for males (CHIN, 2005: 56).

In a Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in Zambia study, where 386 people were interviewed, the report showed that the victims were all girls and the mean age was seven years, ranging from two to twelve years, and all alleged perpetrators were men (Bota, 2003). Child sexual abuse can lead to a variety of distressing feelings, thoughts and behaviours whose results could be fatal. There is a high possibility that sexual abuse may be under-reported.

Research cites various reasons (common to the world) why child sexual abuse is so rampant, poverty, wars, dysfunctional families, violence, socio-cultural systems to mention a few. However, more recently in Southern Africa, there is a belief among some members of the population that an HIV positive person (or someone with an STI) can be cured of the disease by virtue of having sex with a child (Labuschagne, 2005). In this belief, there is great emphasis on fact that the child must be a virgin. This therefore increases the risk of sexual abuse for many under-age children as they are highly likely to be virgins unlike their older counterparts.

In Zambia, in Lusaka urban compounds, there have been a number of sexual abuse cases reported by Isubilo's report on the plight of children in compounds. At Isubilo's Child Drop-in Centre in Chawama compound, close relatives, for selfish ambitions, sexually abused two under-age girls. On one hand, a step-father sexually abused his daughter because he believed he could be cured of HIV, which he believed he contracted from his wife, the child's mother (Isubilo, 2008: 3). On the other hand, a man abused his niece believing that he could get wealthier.

Among sub-Saharan Africa's children, child sexual abuse is a distressingly common story. Even as this region races to adopt many of the developed world's norms for children, from universal education to limits on child labour, child sexual abuse remains stubbornly difficult to eradicate (Labuschagne, 2005).

Although people have done studies and research work on sexual abuse, the problem of girl child sexual abuse is still in existence. There is a gap in literature. It is not clear why the problem is hard to eradicate and why it persists. For this reason, the study will seek to determine why the problem persists and why it is high for under-age girls.

Research Questions

1. Why are under-age girls vulnerable to child sexual abuse in Lusaka?
2. How do cultural beliefs contribute to the problem?
3. Does the gender power relations contribute to child sexual abuse?
4. Are there programmes in the community on sexual abuse?
5. Are there institutional mechanisms that support child sexual abuse case reporting?

Objectives

1. To determine why under-age girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse.
2. To assess whether or not cultural beliefs contribute to girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse.
3. To establish whether gender power relations contribute to child sexual abuse.
4. To establish whether there are programmes on sexual abuse in the community.
5. To determine the availability of institutional mechanisms that support child sexual abuse case reporting.

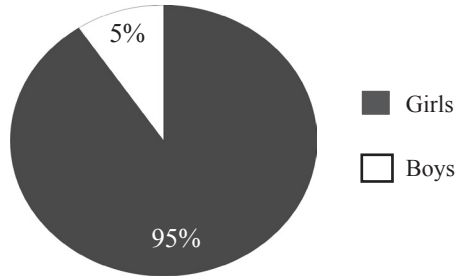
METHODOLOGY

The research study was undertaken in Lusaka urban. The study endeavoured to explore why the problem of sexual abuse was persistent and why under-age girl children were vulnerable to this evil. Using purposive and simple random sampling procedures, a sample size of seventy respondents was arrived at. The study employed both qualitative (in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) and quantitative (structured and semi-structured questionnaires) approaches of data collection in research. The data was then analysed manually and by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS).

Data was collected from the following institutions: Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare, Women and Law in Southern Africa Trust (WILSA), The Child Protection Unit (CPU) of the Zambia Police Service, Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), Isubilo Orphanage and Drop-in Centre, and Jesus Cares Ministries (JCM) Orphanage. Additionally, community members from Chawama, Mtendere and Kabwata compounds were interviewed for more insight into the study.

At YWCA, JCM and IO orphanages, children of age range of four to seventeen were interviewed in Focus Discussion Groups (FDGs), while officers and community members' age range varied from twenty-three to fifty-two years.

The study upheld research ethics and sought permission in written from the UNZA research ethics office and clearance from the Ministry of Health before carrying out the research. Written informed consent was also obtained from the participants.

Chart 1: Vulnerability to Sexual Abuse by Gender

Source: Field Data, 2012

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed that girl child sexual abuse is more common than boy child sexual abuse. Statistics on child sexual abuse also confirm these findings of the data. In many cases, the perpetrators are males and the victims are the female children, most of them below the age of twelve, with mean age being seven years. Over 95 per cent of all respondents said under-age girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse due to: Gender power relations; male adults taking advantage of the trust and respect that children have in them; cultural beliefs and practices; parental negligence and high poverty levels.

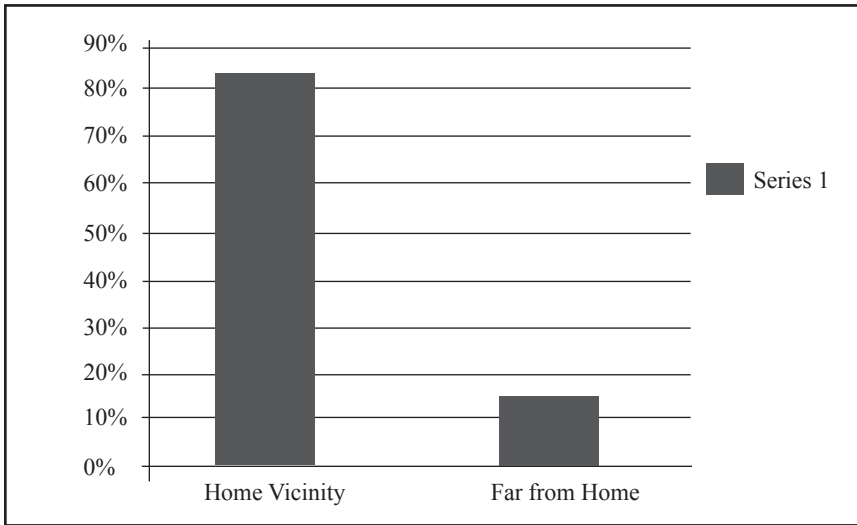
The following themes responded to the study objectives:

Age of Vulnerability to Sexual Abuse

The study showed that girls under the age of twelve were highly vulnerable to sexual abuse as compared to their girl counterparts who are above the age of twelve.

Over 85 per cent of all sexual abuse or defilement cases happen in the vicinity of the home, revealed the respondents. Furthermore, the perpetrators are no strangers to the victim in most cases. This study revealed that 86 per cent of the community members interviewed reported that many child sexual abuses happen between no strangers and a few between strangers. While it was so for community members, officers that were interviewed in the different institutions that deal with sexual abuse matters said sexual abuse was rarely between strangers but there was always a close relationship between the victim and the perpetrator and mostly the perpetrator is a very trusted person by the child.

In a few cases, the perpetrator may not be a close relation, but even in such cases, he is a close person such as a neighbour, a teacher or so and the child knows and trusts him.

Chart 2: Shows where Sexual Abuse mostly Takes Place

Source: Field Data, 2012

The study found that under-age girl children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse because they are easy to coerce, threaten, lure and can be more trusting than much older girls. Chuulu *et al.* (2001), hold that sexual violence against children may lead to: serious lack of confidence; exposure to sexually transmitted diseases including the much dreaded HIV and AIDS; distrust of adults which affects child future development; school drop-outs; unwanted pregnancies; promiscuity; prostitution and seductive behaviour towards members of the opposite sex.

Cultural Beliefs and Child Sexual Abuse

A number of cultural beliefs and practices that contribute to child sexual abuse were identified during the study. Over 90 per cent of all respondents held that it was common practice for men to sexually abuse under-age girls in the quest for riches, business success and wealth. One hundred per cent of the respondents held that one of the major ill cultural contributors to child sexual abuse was the belief that having sexual intercourse with a child can cure HIV and AIDS.

Further, some respondents felt that there was a cultural belief that men could not do without sex for over a period of seven days and more. In the event that their wives were unavailable, 28 per cent of the community member respondents reported that such men tend to pounce on under-age girls for sexual gratification. This particular case was reported to be very common in homes where the female head of the house was always busy with errands to make ends meet and was always leaving the young girls to take care of the home. In most cases, the girls were left with their fathers, uncles and cousins etc., who ended up taking advantage of the situation.

Early marriages and child sexual grooming were also reported as a cultural practice that perpetuate child sexual abuse.

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Gender-Power Relations and Child Sexual Abuse

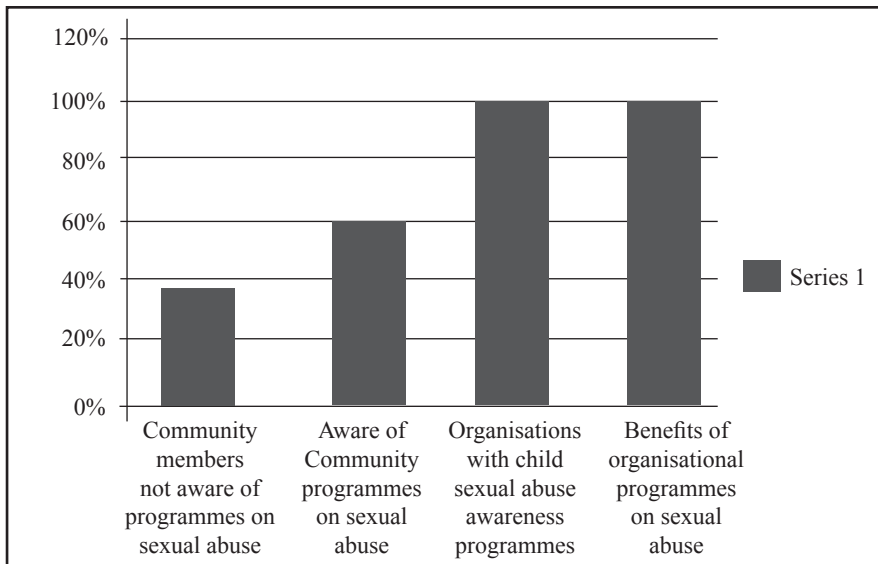
Over 95 per cent of all respondents said the main reason for girl child sexual abuse being so rampant than that of boys was because girls were most vulnerable. The reasons for vulnerability include: male-female power relations which required females to submit to males; male adults taking advantage of the trust and respect that children had in them; girls were easily lured into sex through threats and fake promises of nice gifts; cultural belief that having sex with a minor cured one of HIV and AIDS; selfish ambitions centring on males seeking sexual gratification anyhow; parental negligence; high poverty levels leading to female household heads leaving girls with the responsibility of taking care of homes. In most cases left with male adults who then took advantage of the situation; selfish ambitions to become wealthy and achieve financial success; unavailability of wives to satisfy their husbands' sexual needs; indecent dressing by girls enticed men sexually; above all, girl child sexual abuse was most common because that was what the available statistics show, not so much for boys. On this particular point, it is said that boys rarely not report when sexually abused as reporting could cause them appear less masculine.

Community Programmes and Child Sexual Abuse

While a 100 per cent of respondent organisations that deal with sexual abuse affirmed that they had community programmes on child sexual abuse, it was not so for the respondents from communities. Thirty-eight per cent of community member category of the research participants indicated that although they were aware of the problem of sexual abuse in society, they rarely heard of programmes on sexual abuse. They held that once in a while they heard of the topic in the media. The 62 per cent of this category of respondents however admitted that there were community programmes that existed and these were normally in the media (the newspapers, radios and TVs) and they added that there were also a lot of posters on the matter stuck on several buildings' walls and bill boards. A lot of organisations were also reported to be creating awareness about child sexual abuse. All organisations interviewed in the study agreed that they had programmes within the organisation to sensitise members of staff about the sexual abuse evil. They added that the programmes were extended to the community for them to also benefit thereby contributing to curbing sexual abuse. Asked if the programmes were of great use to the organisations and the community at large, all the respondents (who admitted knowing about such programmes) affirmed that the programmes were beneficial.

Although the programmes were reported to be beneficial, the benefits were not as far reaching as they ought to be. The programmes were highly characterised by inconsistency, insufficient funding, inadequate coverage and unharmonised efforts by partners and stakeholders in the fight against sexual abuse and gender based violence. The community programme coverage also left much to be desired.

Chart 2: Percentage of People Aware and Unaware of Programmes on Child Sexual Abuse, Organisations with Programmes on Child Sexual Abuse and Response on whether or not the Programmes are Beneficial



Source: Field Data, 2012

Institutional Mechanisms and Child Sexual Abuse Case Reporting

From the research, it was evidently clear that both community members and children were to a large extent aware of the sexual abuse offence reporting system in Lusaka urban, with the first point being any police station. Although this is the case, not all of them portrayed full knowledge of the stipulated punishment for perpetrators apart from the fact that they had to be sentenced to a certain number of years in prison.

A good number of NGOs such as YWCA, Care international, WILSA and many others had risen to help curb the social evil of child sexual abuse.

In many cases, the victim of sexual abuse confides in someone and reports the matter. However, the study results sadly revealed that victims only reported after a couple of abuse incidences on them had happened. Rarely, the cases were reported at first time occurrence.

The study sought to know whether or not sexual abuse cases were reported to relevant authorities. Ninety-four per cent of all sexual abuse incidents that the study respondents had either heard of or had handled were reported to the relevant authorities making it clear that the reporting procedure and the relevant authorities were well known. Although a number of cases were reported, it was not all cases that allowed the law to take its full course. This was because people had different ways of settling problems and disputes. Twenty-eight per cent of the respondents held that much as the cases were reported to authorities, there were a number of factors that derailed the complete course of action by the law. These factors included; the families (of either party) and fear of shame, high poverty levels, the status and influence of the perpetrator in the community, christian values that emphasise forgiveness and the bureaucratic procedures at institutions of authority and the courts of law.

Some cases after being reported were withdrawn or settled outside court. Sadly, in cases where the perpetrator was a bread winner and was very influential, he and his family would push and cover up the offence for fear of embarrassment and losing a provider. Chuulu *et al.* (2001), reveal that in their study on gender violence, they came across cases whereby abusive officers were being protected by fellow officers. In such cases, the victim and her representatives had very little say and the case ended up being forgotten.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Zambia is rich with a whole list of laws on gender violence and all its forms including girl child sexual abuse. Further, Zambia has a lot of local and international organisations pushing the agenda of girl child sexual abuse and justice ahead. These organisations work with other organisations and government departments on the same agenda to sensitise and educate all about the evils of sexual abuse and push the justice system to ensure all perpetrators are booked by the law.

Much as the above mechanisms are in place, under-age girls are still more vulnerable to sexual abuse than their older counterparts; ill-cultural beliefs and practices are still a huge contributor to the sexual abuse problem; gender-power relations springing from patriarchal views entrench women and children's esteem and rights subjecting them to sexual violence and abuse; and lastly, the law and systems of justice that should support and protect women and children from sexual abuse are characterised by bureaucratic red-tape which in some cases causes victims and their families to withdraw cases from the law course.

It is hoped that as the study has revealed the findings above and given the recommendations, the plight of girl child sexual abuse that persists in Lusaka urban will be a thing of the past.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study results and conclusion made the following recommendations:

1. Under-age children need more focused education to increase their knowledge about child sexual abuse as they are the chief victims of the problem of sexual abuse. To ensure this is done, sexual abuse lessons must be taught starting from lower primary schools so that all children are well informed about sexual abuse.
2. Development of structures and systems to boost capital and funding injections into already functional community and school programmes, for example the School Liaison Programme under the Zambia Police Service whose primary goal is to educate children on the importance of security, traffic and the role of the Victim Support Unit and CPU.
3. Programmes that provide a holistic approach to the problem i.e., catering for both children and community members should be developed. The approach must also centre on encroaching cultural norms and practices that perpetrate child sexual abuse.

4. There is need to intensify and widen the coverage of programmes on child sexual abuse clearly stipulating and defining types of sexual abuse, the law and punishment for perpetrators.
5. The perceived and expected role of the government, NGOs, CBOs and FBOs in mitigating gender based violence with child sexual abuse include provision of information to communities, supporting existing structures and provision of direct services to beneficiaries.
6. Perceived gaps in the awareness programmes and institutional mechanism for sexual abuse case reporting, as indicated by the majority of respondents, included bureaucratically-long court procedures, cultural and religious doctrines, poor networking among stakeholders, no clear communication and sensitisation to children about the reporting channels and inconsistency of child sexual abuse focused education.
7. Programme harmonisation and stakeholder networking is needed to improve and widen community coverage. Therefore, increased access to education, care and support to victims and their families and justice for the perpetrator is needed.

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