

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse among Convicted Prisoners in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child sexual abuse occurs worldwide including in Zambia. Despite Government efforts to minimize the scourge, the prevalence of defilement is still very high.

Objective: The purpose of the study was to explore and describe convicted prisoners' perceptions of child sexual abuse.

Methods: This was a qualitative study that was carried out among inmates in Lusaka central Prison. Purposive sampling method was used to select the study sample. Eighty nine males aged between 17 and 80 consented and participated in the study. Data were collected using a focus group discussion guide and the discussions were tape recorded. A total of twelve focus group discussions were conducted with the inmates. Each group comprised 6-12 participants with similar characteristics. Data were analyzed using content analysis. The narrative data from participants was analysed to identify prominent themes and patterns among the themes. The analysis of data was conducted simultaneously with data collection. The audio-taped discussions were transcribed and translated from vernacular into English and compared with the field notes. Open coding was done line by line and paragraph by paragraph. Similar responses were grouped together into categories and regrouped into subcategories. Data were constantly compared throughout the process of coding.

Results: Participants were aware of the meaning of child sexual abuse and a girl child was more vulnerable to sexual abuse than a boy child. They attributed child sexual abuse was to lack of parental guidance and supervision, men's lack of sexual self control, alcohol and drug abuse and poverty and HIV/AIDS. Participants stated that child sexual abuse occurs in hidden places and any male is a potential abuser. The inmates reported that traditional beliefs and practices associated with child sexual abuse exist and this scourge can be prevented by punishing the perpetrators.

Conclusion and recommendations: The present study showed that the child sexual abuse is common in Zambia. Therefore, there is a need to intensify information education and communication messages on prevention of child sexual and to strengthen and enforce laws regarding child sexual abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, millions of minors are sexually subjugated and forced into unprotected sex.¹ The problem is further exacerbated by the misplaced beliefs primarily by men that engaging in sexual intercourse with a child will not only ensure that he is not infected by HIV/AIDS, but also that if he is HIV positive, the act may cure him.² Child sexual abuse occurs when an older person uses a vulnerable person for his/her sexual gratification.³ A child is a person below the age of sixteen years.³ The offender is older and more powerful, though not necessarily an adult.

Sexual abuse of children is usually carried out by males in the family, often the father or step father,

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uncle, Grandfather or older brother and it may be by a family friend or a stranger.⁴ Girls are much more likely to be sexually abused than boys but boys are often victims of sodomists. The abuse can be in the form of fondling, sexual intercourse or involvement in pornography.⁴ There are three types of sexual abuse of children.⁵ These include sexual exploitation of children by sex syndicated which use children for production of erotic materials for pornographic magazines and films or bribe or abduct children to join prostitution rings, erotic touching such as fondling, digital penetration of vagina or anus, orogenital stimulation including indecent curiosity gazing or observing any woman or girl who is in a state of undress or semi undress and the adult type heterosexual or homosexual relationships with full intercourse, either vaginal or anal.

Whatever, form the abuse takes, the child is often pressurized to keep quiet. The adult may say, it is our secret and if you tell anyone I will get in trouble or may threaten the child. The child may feel guilty and although anxious for the abuse to stop, is often afraid to tell anyone. She/he may fear that the family will break up and the abuser will be sent to prison or may fear to be sent to prison, blamed and chased away from the family by family members.

The Government in collaboration with civil society organizations and other stakeholders has for some time now been implementing various measures aimed at counteracting sexual violence against women and children. Specifically, the measures aimed at changing traditional or customary attitudes and practices that perpetuate the lower status accorded to women, reforming existing laws and promoting awareness of and enforcement of existing laws.⁶

In order to intensify the efforts aimed at counteracting sexual and gender based violence, the government established the Victim Support Unit (VSU) in 1994. The VSU became operational in 1996 as part of the Zambia Police reform program to specifically deal with victims of sexual and Gender Based violence crime. Cases dealt with include femicide, property grabbing, spouse battering and

sexual abuse. In addition, to the Government efforts, interventions such as the introduction of drop in centers and shelters for battered women and abused children have been established by nongovernmental organizations such as the Young Women's Christian Association and Women in Law and Development in Africa.

Sexual abuse of children remains a significant problem for females particularly girls throughout the world.⁴ In Zambia, there is a national and multidisciplinary approach to tackle issues of child sexual abuse. The constitution of Zambia, penal code 138 and the Juvenile Act prohibit sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children. According to the Penal Code, any person who commits the crime of rape shall upon conviction be liable to imprisonment for a period of ten years. Moreover, where the rape was committed against a child or an insane person, the Minister of Youth and child development should cause the names of such perpetrators to be punished in the Government gazette.³

Despite all efforts to minimize the problem of child sexual abuse, the number of cases of defilement is increasing. According to the University Teaching hospital records, defilement cases increased from 406 in 2001 to 1012 in 2006.⁸

METHODOLOGY

Study design, setting and target population

The study was a qualitative study that was conducted in Lusaka central prison. Lusaka central prison was chosen because it was assumed that it had a representative sample of sexual abusers from both rural and urban areas. The target populations were prisoners convicted of child sexual abuse in the Lusaka central prison.

Sampling method and sample size

Purposive sampling method was used to select the respondents. A total of 90 participants participated in the study. The inclusion criteria for this study was all prisoners convicted of child sexual abuse in the Lusaka central Prison as long they were willing to participate in the study.

Ethical consideration

The study complied with the Helsinki Declaration as revised in 2000 and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Zambia. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Commissioner of prisons. Participants were provided with background information about the study and its purpose and were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. Participants were assured of confidentiality. All participants gave informed and written consent. Two research assistants who were inmates were trained about ethical issues such as mutual respect and the importance of confidentiality. Throughout the study care was taken to maintain the anonymity of all information.

Data collection

Twelve focus group discussions were held with the inmates and a focus group discussion was used to guide the discussion. The focus group discussion guide was pre-tested before the actual study was conducted. Each group comprised 6-12 participants with similar characteristics such as age and sex. Discussions were tape recorded with consent of the respondents. The discussions lasted for one hour thirty minutes to two hours.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using content analysis. The analysis of data was carried out as an ongoing process, integrated with collecting and coding. The audio taped focus group discussions were translated into English and compared with the field notes. The analysis was conducted in English but some concepts were not fully translated because they were clearly expressed in a Zambia language. Open coding was done line by line and paragraph by paragraph. Similar responses were then grouped together into categories and subcategories and then themes were developed. The model of Lincoln and Guba was used to ensure trustworthiness of the study.¹¹ The criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability were ensured.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Themes generated from the participants discussions were, meaning of child sexual abuse, most sexually abused child, where sexual abuse occurs, why sexual abuse occurs, who is likely to sexually abuse children, traditional beliefs and practices regarding child sexual abuse and prevention of child sexual abuse. The themes are discussed below.

Meaning of child sexual abuse

Most of the participants described sexual abuse as having sex with a “minor” as indicated by this participant, “*sexual abuse is having sex with a young girl below the age 16 years*”. Similar findings were reported in the United States of America where 97% of the respondents in their study were familiar with term child sexual abuse.¹⁰

Most sexually abused child

In the focus group discussions, it was reportedly said that a girl child was the most abused child than a boy child due to reasons such as poverty, improper dressing, lack of parental control and guidance, lack of self control by men and belief in traditional medicine. One inmate shared:

“Okay. Young girls do not dress properly nowadays you know what I mean. They wear tight clothing, miniskirts and see through dresses and these are things men get attracted to. Moreover due to poverty young girls go out to look for food and money in places like streets and taverns, sometimes selling some food staff unaccompanied by adults, they can be easily cheated by men who can sexually abuse them”.

Past research suggest that sexual abuse of females is more common than abuse of males.¹⁰

Where sexual abuse occurs

The inmates said that sexual abuse can take place in a hidden place such as the abuser's home or bush. It happens in hidden places where there are no people as explained by one participant. “*It can be in the bush, the abusers house.*” Participants stated that children who are likely to be sexually abused are girls who are selling in the streets and are

unaccompanied by an adult, children living with Uncles or step parents, a single mother's children, children without parental care, orphans, street children and mentally challenged children and deaf and dumb. This is reflected in the following responses: *“The children who are likely to be abused especially by us men are those selling merchandise in the streets, those with parent (orphans) who fend for themselves, children living with a single parent such as a mother who is struggling to look after them, children living with Uncles or step parents and street children.”*

“Sexual abuse is common among children who are mentally challenged and those who are deaf and dumb.”

Why sexual abuse occurs

With regards to the reasons why child sexual abuse was common, many participants attributed it to lack of parental guidance and supervision, men's lack of sexual self control, alcohol and drug abuse and poverty and HIV/AIDS. Two participants explained:

“Parents must be responsible enough and provide for their children instead of sending them to the streets to sell foods to raise some income to feed the family. Some parents have a tendency of sending their children to the street to sell food stuffs. You know that some men lack self control and others because of they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs they can grab any child and abuse her”.

“Many people in this country are poor and cannot afford to feed their children as they would to. Then they make children contribute to the household income by sending them to sell merchandise on the streets this makes the children become vulnerable to sexual abuse. The other contributing factor is HIV/AIDS that has become common in this country. People consult traditional healers in search of a cure and are told to abuse children as part of the treatment”.

UNICEF reported that poverty is a common factor which exposes children for abuse.⁹

Who is likely to sexually abuse children?

In terms of who is likely to sexually abuse children, the participants gave a wide range of responses. Some

said that males are potential sexual abusers and that a sexual abuser could be a Minister, Member of Parliament or a call boy (Kaponya). Others said that sexual abusers could be dagga smokers, drunkards, men who take sexual enhancing drugs and those who want to get rich quickly or who seek treatment for diseases such as HIV from Traditional healers. This was noted in the responses from the two participants as indicated below:

“Well, any male could be a potential abuser and it could be a Minister, Member of Parliament or a call boy (Kaponya)”.

“Men who are sexual abusers are usually hyper sexual active, dagga smokers, drunkards and men who take sexual enhancing charms to increase their desire for women and virility”. Others are those who believe that they can get rich or cured of HIV if they sexually abused a child. It is usually traditional healers who tell them to such things.”

These findings are supported by previous studies that suggest that males are common perpetrators of child sexual abuse.¹⁰

Traditional beliefs and practices regarding child sexual abuse

Most participants were of the view that some traditional beliefs and practices existing in the community could be associated with child sexual abuse, for instance due to poverty some people desire to get rich quickly and others want treatment for sexually transmitted disease, mental illness or HIV/AIDS, they then consult a traditional healer for medicine and are told to sexually abuse a child as part of treatment as one participant said:

“Child sexual abuse is prescribed as a lucky charm (bwanga or chizimba). A traditional healer will tell you to have sex with a young girl if you want prosperity in your business or to get treated of sexually transmitted diseases, mental illness or HIV/AIDS”.

Participants were of the view that traditionally Nyau dancers were allowed to sleep with young girls for them to gain some supernatural powers as one participant narrated “It is allowed for Nyau to sleep with young girls. This gives the Nyau some supernatural powers”.

Prevention of child sexual abuse

During the discussions participants agreed that the best way to stop child sexual abuse was to punish the offenders. To sensitize the public, children and parents on child sexual abuse, punishing traditional healers, parents to provide care and guidance for children as this participant said:

“The only way to stop child sexual abuse is to punish all those that commit the offence and to teach people, parents and the children so that they are aware that such things are bad. Parents who send children to sell in the streets should also be punished and compelled take care of and provide for their child as well as those who cheat people diseases can be cured by sexually abusing children or that one can get rich quickly by sleeping with a child.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study was to explore and describe perceptions of child sexual abuse convicts in Lusaka central Prison. The findings suggest that child sexual abuse exists, people are aware of it and a girl child is more vulnerable to sexual abuse than a boy child. Factors contributing to child sexual abuse are lack of parental guidance and supervision, men's lack of sexual self control, alcohol and drug abuse and poverty and HIV/AIDS. Prevention programs for child sexual abuse may be effective if convicted prisons views on the subject are taken into account. It is envisaged that Policy makers, Health care providers, Prison and Police services, Judiciary, Non-governmental organizations dealing with child sexual abuse will utilize the findings to design appropriate information education and communication messages that will help to child minimize sexual abuse. However, further research is need on this subject.

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