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## Exploring Sexual Abuse of School Children in Families: A Case Study of Masvingo District, Zimbabwe

**Magwa Simuforosa**

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education  
Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

**Ingwani Viola**

Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education  
Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

### **Abstract:**

*Child sexual abuse is a social problem which spans across an individual's physical, cognitive, interpersonal and emotional functioning. It violates the rights of children to freedom and security, privacy and integrity, health and in some cases, even the right to life. It creates fear in the boy or girl, who may be harmed for life. It is a unique phenomenon which occurs more frequently than people realise. This study aims to explore various factors which contribute to child sexual abuse in families and how schools can help protect children from the abuse. The case study design was used to collect data from parents, teachers and students using interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. It emerged from the study that children are sexually abused in their families as a result of the power adults especially men have over children, domestic violence, and cultural practices practised in families. In conclusion the paper suggests ways schools can help to protect children from such abuse.*

**Keywords:** *abuse, sexual abuse, contributing factor, human rights*

*"My 19-year-old cousin used to put me on his lap, show me how to do homework. He began to keep his fly open where I can see (sic)his private part. Then one day, he put me on his bed, took off his underwear and mine. Then he slept over me. It was very painful." - A 10-year-old school girl in Kathmandu, Nepal (Save the Children Norway/CWIN, Nepal, 2003)*

### **1. Introduction and Background**

One of the most significant problems children face today is the threat of sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is a global phenomenon that is regarded as one of the greatest social problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Child sexual abuse is when a child or young person is sexually abused when any person uses their power over the child to involve that child in sexual activity (Department of Human services 2013:2). It involves a wide range of sexual activity such as fondling of a child's genitals or getting child to fondle abuser's genitals, vaginal or anal penetration by penis, finger or object. Child sexual abuse is societal problem whose origins date back to the times of ancient Greeks and Romans. Historical accounts have been found of child molestation, including incest, among ancient Greeks and Romans, in accounts of life in the Renaissance, and during the Victorian era (Richter & Higson Smith 2004:23). Sexual abuse of children has captured the world's imagination in a way that very few other issues have. In the global report of the International Tribunal for Children's Rights released in 2001, the President of the Tribunal noted that despite the universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 all indications are that violence against children is on the rise, especially violence of a sexual nature (<http://www.info.gov.za>).

Child sexual abuse has a devastating lifelong effect on the victims, because sexual abuse generates great anguish and destruction in the lives of these children. It is a violation of the child's physical and psychological integrity and a transgression of the moral norms of the child and society (Save Children, 2005:9). In the same vein Kibaru-Mbae (2011) asserts that child sexual abuse is a human rights issue with serious negative public health consequences including physical, psychological, emotional and social effects. Thus, child sexual abuse is a gross human rights violation.

The family normally trusted by children and often responsible for their care is responsible for much of the sexual violence. According to the Deb and Modak (2010) a basic assumption of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is that the family is the natural environment for the growth and well being of all its members- particularly for children. Unfortunately, the family is also the most common place where children experience different forms of violence such as sexual abuse. Summat (2014) maintains that the vast majority of child sexual abuse occurs within the family setting.

The prevalence of sexual abuse by parents, and other close family members has been reported across the world. For instance, in Minnesota Deb and Modak (2010) explored the prevalence of family abuse. Findings indicate that sexual abuse in families was reported by both girls and boys and among children of all ethnic groups. According to statistics 30-40% of children are sexually abused by family members (<http://www.clevelandrapecrisis.org>) 18 May. A study by Russell in San Francisco on sexual abuse in the family and found that 47% of stepfathers and 26% of biological fathers committed serious sexual abuse with their children (Kinnear, 2007). Jemal (2012) cites a study in Ethiopia in relation to victims' relationship to abusers, and some estimates revealed that out of the total of reported child sexual abuse cases, 50% of them were abused by someone children knew, while 30-40% was committed by family members and the remaining 10-20% by strangers. In Zimbabwe in an article in the *Newsday* 14 June 2014 entitled *My father, my rapist my son's father: Court says No* by Mapamhidze two underage teenagers were raped by their father on countless occasions since 2011 resulting in pregnancy when the mother was away on business.

At the opening of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of Children's Parliament and commemorations to mark the day of the African Child in Harare, President Mugabe pointed out that an 'epidemic' of child sexual abuse is plaguing Zimbabwe. The President said weekly briefings from police contained disturbing sexual abuse statistics sometimes with the father or uncle abusing their children (*Sunday Mail Reporter*, 22 June 2014).

The main focus of this paper is therefore to find out the main factors contributing to sexual abuse of children in families. Knowledge of these factors makes prevention possible.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the radical feminist theory and the environmental theory in trying to explain contributing factors to child sexual abuse within families.

The radical feminist perspective centres on patriarchal nature of society in contributing to child sexual abuse in families. According to Ward, Polascheck and Beach (2006) patriarchy has been defined by radical feminist writers as the worldview that seeks to maintain male control over females. Sexual abuse is viewed as a concrete expression of the power men have over women and children. Gender is the primary factor in child sexual abuse in families.

The environmental theory posits that child sexual abuse results from social and environmental stress (Newberge, 1983). Stressful life events and conditions such as poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment and violent social milieu are prominent factors considered within this theoretical orientation. The perspective according to Newberge emphasises environmental factors of a family which by being felt overwhelmingly stressful, interfere with parents' ability to care for their children.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

The increasing number of children being sexually abused by family is worrying. Family members are turning monsters threatening the livelihood of children. The family is no longer a safe haven for children who are sexually abused by the very people who have the responsibility of not just feeding for them but providing protection also.

## 4. Research Questions

- What are the factors that contribute to sexual abuse of children within families?
- How can schools help to protect children against interfamilial sexual abuse of children?

## 5. Purpose Of Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore the factors leading to sexual abuse of children in their families and how schools can assist children from sexual abuse at home.

## 6. Methodology

The major concern of this study was to establish the main factors contributing to sexual abuse of children in families and then suggest ways schools can help children protect themselves from such abuse. The study was carried in Masvingo district.

### 6.1. Design

The study fell within a qualitative research paradigm. A qualitative case study was utilised. The case study worked best for this study because the researcher wanted to investigate an issue in depth and provide an explanation that can cope with the complexity and subtlety of real life situations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Child sexual abuse in families is a contemporary phenomenon within a real life context. The case study focuses on studying a few instances and as informed by Denscombe (2007) there was greater opportunity to delve into the matter in detail. Another strength of the case study which made the study adopt it is that it was grounded in varied sources of data and a variety of research methods.

### 6.2. Sampling

The population of the study was made up of all students, teachers and parents in the study area. Cresswell (2009) mentions that sampling aims to produce representative selections of population elements. Purposive sampling was employed to select schools and participants. The idea of purposefully sampling was to obtain the most characteristic representation of attributes that served the purpose of the study (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). The variables were seen relevant in sourcing data for the study. Three schools were selected. From each school 4 teachers, 6 students and 2 parents were selected bringing to a total of 36 participants. The sample size was directly correlated to the nature of purpose of research problem and data collection strategies (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006:322).

### 6.3. Data Collection and analysis

The qualitative case study obtained data from interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions. Parents were interviewed and questionnaires were distributed to teachers and learners. An inductive approach to analyse responses was done to ensure that themes and categories emerged. Triangulation was achieved from soliciting information from teachers, parents and children and use of different data gathering tools.) Triangulation enhances validity of case study and allows generalizations (Flick, 2009).

## 7. Findings and Discussion

The study established that a number of factors contribute to sexual abuse of children in families and these are discussed separately below.

### 7.1. Unequal gender and power relations

All the participants agreed that gender and power relations in most African families go a long way in explaining why children are sexually abused in families. Participants pointed out that men are naturally powerful and can sexually force themselves on the weaker sex. One parent had this to say:

*In our African families there is male domination which makes men feel that they have power over women and children. Both women and children are forced to engage in sex even if they do not want.*

Data from interviews and questionnaires revealed that through socialisation processes men come to believe that they have a right to be sexually sustained by females. Research by Lalor (2005:11) attest to the fact above that women and children are naturally subordinated to men and bound to serve their needs. According to Lalor a common theme in patriarchal society is the so-called 'uncontrollability' of male sexual urges and the role of physical force in sexual relations. In line with this, *feminist* theorists, like, Betty Denise Thompson (2001), & Ann Oakley (1981) list unequal gender-based power relations within patriarchal society as an etiological factor of child sexual abuse (Best, 2003:147-148). Dawes and Higson-Smith (2004:66) share this view and assert that patriarchal ideology and the process of socialisation have the effect of constructing a notion of childhood that renders the child vulnerable to sexual abuse since young children are socialised into a set of unequal gender and power relations.

While it was acknowledged that mostly men sexually abuse children, participants also made it quite clear that women in families due to unequal power relations are more likely to sexual abuse children. In agreement with this finding UNICEF (2010) established that gender inequality also affects the attitudes to and treatment of boys who may be victims of sexual abuse by adult women.

### 7.2. Poverty

Data from interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions revealed that poverty is a factor contributing to sexual abuse of children in families. Antonowicz (2010:28), NGO Forum, (2009) & Louw et al. (2007) point out that sexual abuse often has its roots in poverty. Poverty was said to exacerbate child sexual abuse in a number of ways. Poor parents notably from rural areas were said to force their children into early marriages for financial gain. Sharing this view Hanzi, (2006:21) asserts that early marriages represent the most prevalent form of sexual abuse of girls and consumes the childhood years of a girl and compromises her schooling and health. Many families especially African families practice arranged marriages, which are often arranged at very young ages (Thompson & Wilkinson, 2010:49). Early marriages represent the most prevalent form of sexual abuse of children. The family deliberately exposes children to sexual abuse. Child marriages are still a common occurrence in parts of Africa, India and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean (Kirton, 2011:190). Parents make marital choices for daughters and sons with little regard for personal implications. Rather, they look upon marriage as a family building strategy or an economic arrangement (Stark, 2007: 23).

Child wives are more vulnerable to sexual abuse (Cheal, 2008:79). This is so because of the unequal power relations that exists in child marriages as men always tend to be older than girls. Cheal (2008) asserts that child wives have sexual intercourse before the onset of menstruation, early and very painful sex and forced sexual activity with their husbands, even if they have indicated an unwillingness to do so. According to World Health Organisation, 48% of 15-18 year olds in Bangladesh reported being sexually assaulted by their husbands (de la Vega & Dahlstrom, 2007:13). Forced child marriages give a man licence to impose sex upon a girl, denying her control over her own body.

Due to poverty it was also established that some parents allow their children especially girls to engage in sex so that the financial problems of the family will be met by the adult. One parent had this to say;

*There are many parents who due to poverty make the girl child engage in sex with rich people so that their monetary needs will be met. Even sometimes without forcing them to engage in sexual activities parents also turn a blind eye to their children's sexual relationships with adults to simply receive financial support.*

Poverty makes parents renege on their responsibility of providing for the needs of their children.

It was pointed out that especially in towns parents due to poverty can rent only one room which they share with their children. There was a common perception that poor or inadequate sleeping rooms in families can lead to sexual abuse of children. The study revealed that in home environments characterised by overcrowding sexual abuse can occur. It was observed that in overcrowded rooms child sexual abuse can easily take place. In concurrence with this finding Dawes and Higson (2004) affirm that overcrowding goes hand in hand with poverty and raises the risk of child sexual abuse. From both parents and children some of these sentiments were echoed:

*When parents share one room or accommodation is poor especially in towns the children will watch or hear the parents when they are engaged in sexual activity and they will in turn do likewise. Sometimes when the other parent is away for some days the other parent especially the father will take the opportunity and sexually abuse children,*

Thus informed by Bandura's 1977 Social Learning Theory, in these situations where children share sleeping areas with parents or older children, children might hear or see parents having sex and may want to copy the behaviour. Children learn from observing and imitating others (<http://Princeton.edu>) and by nature children are curious, and this can lead them to sexually abuse others. There is a strong correlation between poverty and child sexual abuse.

## 8. HIV and AIDS Myths

The idea that one may cleanse oneself of HIV and AIDS and STDs by having intercourse with a virgin or young girl is frequently referred to as a possible explanation for the apparent increase in the occurrence of child sexual abuse (Laror, 2005:10). This assertion is consistent with the findings of this study. All the participants were agreed that the advice given by some traditional healers to HIV positive people that engaging themselves sexually with virgins cures the disease leads to sexual abuse of children. The verbatim report below by one interviewee confirms this.

*Some people do not accept the fact that HIV/AIDS has no cure. They consult traditional healers who wrongly tell them that there is a cure for this deadly disease. Believing in the advice of the traditional healer the HIV positive person sexually abuses a child. It is surprising that even the learned people accept this myth.*

Consistent with the findings Devasia & Kumar (2009:71) express that sexually transmitted diseases are thought to be cured by having sexual intercourse with children. The myth of 'HIV and AIDS virgin cure' is prevalent in the community (Thompson & Wilkinson, 2010: 48 ). In some parts of Africa child sexual abuse is justified by some perpetrators as a defence against HIV and AIDS. Kibarue-Mbae (2011:38) alludes to this fact by pointing out that virgin cleansing in relation to HIV and AIDS is a belief buoyed by an old myth that sex with children is a cure for a variety of diseases. This misconception has dramatically increased sexual abuse of children.

### 8.1. Single parent and Step families

Another worrisome finding was that children who do not live with both of their biological parents are more likely to experience sexual abuse in the home. Sentiments expressed by both rural and urban participants were that children who come from single parent families and children who stay with stepfathers are at the risk of sexual abuse. Most participants articulated that a stepfather is likely to sexual abuse a step daughter simply because there is no relational blood bond. In a related study cited by Sammut (2014) The 2010 US Fourth National Incidence on study of abuse and Neglect found that compared to peers living in married two-biological parent families children living with a single parent who had a partner in the home were 20 times more likely to be sexually abused and children living in a step family were between 8 and 9 times more likely to be sexually abused. According to this study step and single parent families accounted for more than two thirds 66%-80% of all children who experienced child sexual abuse. In Zimbabwe the issue of step fathers sexually abusing step children is prevalent. An example is given of a prosecutor at Masvingo magistrates Tafirei Tandirai 42 who raped his eight year old step daughter while his wife was away on business. (Staff Reporter 'Prosecutor up for raping daughter' 13 June 2014 Masvingo Star.)

Richter, Dawes and Higson-Smith (2007:457) are also of the view that children from incomplete and broken homes are generally more vulnerable to being sexually abused than children from stable home environments. Children raised in incomplete families generally have more freedom to do as they wish because of the lack of parental control. The parents from such a home may have many responsibilities and fail to monitor children fully. These children are often emotionally neglected and feel that the attention of the perpetrator fills a void in their lives. However in many single parent homes this does not happen for the one parent can spend quality time with the children.

### 8.2. Domestic violence

Child sexual abuse is directly linked with domestic violence in the family (Opobo & Wandega, 2011:21). The study findings also confirmed that family dysfunction often forms the context within which child sexual abuse occurs. Continuous fighting in families has been reported to be greatly contributing to domestic violence leading to separation and divorce in families. Some of the teachers' and parents' responses included some of the following;

*When for example parents are in a domestic dispute the husband can vent his anger on children who at times will be against what the father will be doing and will sexually abuse them. Sometimes when for instance, a mother due to domestic violence leaves the home the father can take this opportunity to sexually abuse children who will be left in his custody.*

Opobo & Wandega (2011) also echoes that in domestic violence where parents separate or divorce, children are left to stay mainly with father, who many times leaves children with housemaids and houseboys. Children in such situations are vulnerable to sexual exploitation by fathers, housemaids and neighbours. Hunter (2010:15) reiterates that children have been shown to be more vulnerable to child sexual abuse following parental separation.

### 8.3. Media exposure

Media exposure was said to be a contributor to sexual abuse in the families. All participants were of the view that despite the fact that modern technology educates and entertains it also has some negative impacts. One negative impact was that it can lead to children engaging in sexual abuse. In the home children have access to a number of technologies. It was emphasised that children have access to internet, television, social networking sites, cellphones, and video games and all these can expose children to sexually exploitive material. Children can be exposed to these materials in families and parents usually might not be aware of this. Opobo and Wandega (2011) also points out that media can inform, educate, and influence viewers and listeners. Unfortunately media poses threats to protection of children against sexual abuse. There is a growing problem of sexual images of children being available for viewing and downloading from different media (Louge, 2006:2). According to Dehlmer (2009:3) the growth of

technology has changed the world, which in turn has changed the daily lives of children and adolescents. Kids exposed to sexual acts on television are almost twice as likely to initiate sexual intercourse with other kids. Grapes (2012:18) expresses that children are the most vulnerable to sexual abuse, both because they are in the process of forming their own sense of right or wrong and because they cannot distinguish fantasy from reality.

### 9. Prevention of Sexual Abuse in Families

It emerged from the study that child sexual abuse by family members clearly shows that the social and moral fibre of the society has gone wrong. This abuse has to be stopped for victims experience myriad physical and mental health problems which often persist through adulthood.

Asked on how schools can help protect children from sexual abuse the participants pointed out that the burden of prevention need not be placed on children only. Family members were said to be the single most important factor in preventing child sexual abuse. It was said that schools could help prevent sexual abuse of learners in families by organising workshops to conscientise parents and guardians on need to refrain from sexually abusing children. It was also pointed out that schools should utilise such days as parents day, prize and speech day to educate families on the need to protect children from sexual abuse and informing them how sexual abuse impacts on the overall development of child.

In line with the above findings (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2011) postulates that concerns have been raised that most programs target children and inappropriately place the burden of prevention on the child. The burden of child sexual abuse should be distributed across all family members. Changing the behaviour of the adults rather than the behaviour of children is the ideal way to prevent sexual abuse in families.

Another way schools were said to help prevent sexual abuse in families was that the learners should receive adequate information on child sexual abuse that is know different ways abusers can use to groom them, measures they can take to protect themselves from sexual abuse. Educational programs targeting prevention of sexual abuse should be provided by schools. One participant cited President Mugabe as reported by the Sunday mail reporter in an article titled : Child sexual abuse 'epidemic' alarms President' in the Sunday Mail 22 June 2014 saying that it was important to introduce skills based education as opposed to the present 'bookish' curriculum in fighting against child sexual abuse.

Finkelhor (2009) holds the same view when he stresses that one central goal in prevention of child sexual abuse is to impart skills to help children identify boundary violations, unwanted forms of touching , as well as to teach them how to refuse approaches, how to break off interactions, and how to report abuse. An international meta-analysis study by Finkelhor found out that children of all ages who had participated in educational programs were six to seven times more likely to demonstrate protective behaviour in simulated situations than children who had not. Prevention programs teach children to recognize child sexual abuse, give them skills to avoid abuse and encourage them to report the abuse they have experienced, are experiencing or may experience in future ( Topping and Barron 2009 cited in National Sexual Violence Resource Center , 2011)

The study also established that more research on sexual abuse need to be carried out so that schools can be empowered with more strategies they can adopt in order to help fight sexual abuse of their learners by family members. Finkelhor (2009) points out that no strong scientific evidence points as yet in the direction of one strategy to prevent child sexual abuse, more research is needed to help develop and identify such strategies. With additional research there is every reason to believe that much more can be accomplished to help schools curb sexual abuse of learners in their families.

### 10. Conclusion

Family members have a duty to protect children against sexual abuse so that the children enjoy childhood as a time of play that is a-sexual and peaceful. Educators are also an important group in the preventing and recognition of child sexual abuse. Family members must not sexually abuse children hence affecting the survival and healthy growth of the child as stated in Article 27 of The United Nations Convention of Rights of the Child (UNCRC).The convention acknowledges rights and duties of the family. The child has a right to survival and development and this can only be achieved under a stable caring environment that does not subject children to sexual abuse.

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