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An exploration of the phenomenon of child sexual abuse in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the phenomenon of Child Sexual Abuse (hereafter, referred to as CSA) in Zimbabwe. As in other countries, CSA remains topical in Zimbabwe with reports suggesting an upward trajectory in the incidence of sexual abuse amongst children. Child sexual abuse affects people at multiple levels. At the level of the child, CSA has serious physiological, psychological, behavioural, social and economic effects. CSA also affects families and communities. It is against this background that this study sought to explore the phenomenon CSA in Zimbabwe. The study was guided by five objectives which were; to investigate the socio-economic circumstances leading to CSA in Zimbabwe; to explore the profile of CSA survivors and CSA perpetrators; to investigate the efficacy of the current intervention strategies used in helping survivors of child sexual abuse; to investigate the challenges faced by VFS stakeholders in Zimbabwe and to generate Child sexual abuse prevention guideline(s) framework from the components provided by the research data. To achieve the above objectives, the study adopted a qualitative research approach using a case study research design. The research population comprised of the Victim Friendly System: Zimbabwe's CSA prevention response. The VFS is a multi-layered response forum made up of government and non-government organisations. Thematic sampling a form of purposive sampling was used to sample participants, key informants and VFS documents which include minutes of meetings and court files. Participants were made of two categories. The first category consisted of 28 national representatives. The second category consisted of 10 regional representatives from Harare and Gokwe. The study sites were purposively selected to represent an urban and a rural setting. Data was collected using in-depth interviews that were guided through the use of semi structured interview guides. Applied thematic content analysis was used to analyse data.

From this study's finding it was established that CSA in Zimbabwe does not occur in a vacuum, but rather exists within a context of children's ecological environments. This research identified trusting relatives, neighbours and friends with children; temporal isolation of children; poverty; absentee parents and guardians; cultural and religious beliefs; child trafficking; substance use; child labour; step parenting; disability; living arrangements; access and exposure to pornographic materials and revictimisation as key CSA socioeconomic contributory circumstances. Utilising the ecological model, the study categories the socioeconomic circumstances that contribute to CSA

as largely microecological and macro ecological factors. These microecological and macro ecological factors are seen to be interacting at different levels with children's ecological environment. The identification of circumstances leading to CSA is essential for the development of successful prevention programmes, as CSA prevention programmes can then be designed to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors.

Utilising court documents, the study profiled CSA survivors and offenders. The study found out that sex of the child; age of the child; relationship and familiarity with the perpetrators and children's prior history of CSA were key characteristics common amongst children most likely to experience CSA. The study also showed that CSA offenders are most likely to be related and familiar with the child; CSA offenders are also likely to be adult male and repeat CSA offenders. However, results also showed that juveniles and women do commit CSA offences.

The research identified a number of strength and weaknesses inherent in the Victim Friendly System as a multisectoral response to CSA. The results showed that multisectoral response to CSA created a suitable environment that is conducive for children to testify and provided integrated services. The Victim Friendly System as a multisectoral response to CSA also helped pooling of resources from multiple stakeholders, created role player accountability; catered for the inclusion of non offending family members. Evidence based interventions was another key element that was evident from the multi sectorial initiative. Notwithstanding the strengths, the study unearthed some weaknesses of the VFS. Some of the main weaknesses of this system are limited coverage; poor post trial services and overreliance on donor support. On the other hand, the VFS is not known and remains invisible amongst many potential clients. Poor forensic collection and the releasing of CSA perpetrators on bail into the child's environment were also found to be key problem areas inherent with the VFS system. Also, the issue of CSA survivors having to retell their rape experience throughout the VFS chain was found to be a major loophole.

It emerged from the study that VFS organisations face a plethora of challenges that include human resource challenges, economic challenges, governance, operational and legal challenges. The identified challenges affected the VFS's ability to attain its goals.

Utilising findings from this research, the study proposes an Ecological CSA prevention guideline framework. The Ecological CSA prevention guideline framework conceptualises CSA prevention as being three layered and encompassing primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. The proposed model looks at prevention from an ecological perspective arguing that prevention efforts need to involve children's ecological systems and environments. However, the study argues that success of the Ecological CSA prevention framework and guidelines hinge on factors such as universal coverage of interventions, availability of resources, creation of an enabling legislative framework, being sensitive to the need of persons with disability and the need for continuous research.

The study makes a number of conclusions. Firstly, the socio economic factors that lead to CSA are located and part of children's ecological environments. Secondly, children are more likely to be sexually abused by people in their ecological environments. Thirdly, multisectoral interventions to CSA are beneficial to organisations and CSA survivors. Fourthly, challenges affect the ability of multisectoral forums to meet their intervention objectives. Lastly, CSA must be approached at the primary, secondary and tertiary level perspective, taking into account children's ecological systems.