

Educators' Perceptions of Family Risk Factors Associated With Child Sexual Abuse. The Case of Gweru Primary Schools

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Abstract

The study sought to establish educators' perceptions of family risk factors associated with child sexual abuse among children in Gweru urban primary schools. A descriptive survey was adopted to carry out the study. A total of thirty educators, comprising of five school heads and twenty five teachers, all purposively selected, participated in the study. The teachers responded to a questionnaire while face to face interviews were carried out with the school heads. The study established that educators perceived changes in the family structure, poverty in the family, parenting styles and parental personality factors as the major factors associated with child sexual abuse. The study concluded that the family was central to child safety. The major recommendations for the study were that there was need to carry out vigorous awareness campaigns on child safety within the communities. The study also recommended that school authorities should be encouraged to investigate and report to the Social Services Department all cases of children living in child-headed families so that the department takes measures to ensure that such children get community protection and support.

Keywords :Risk factors, Child sexual abuse, Family, Educators, Perceptions.

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem that transcends racial, economic and social boundaries. Munro (2000) defines child sexual abuse as any sexual act with a child performed by an adult or an older child with or without the child's consent. The social, economic and technological changes taking place in Zimbabwe are impacting heavily on the safety of children. Increasing poverty, aggravated by the global economic decline and the devastating effects of HIV and AIDS pandemic have made children more vulnerable to child sexual abuse than ever before (Anarldo, 2001). According to Kavishe (2006) reports on the number of cases in which children are sexually abused is continuing to rise, suggesting that the problem is not diminishing. While there are varying risk factors associated with child sexual abuse, the mostly recognized ones are those linked to the family

(Lahey,2003).The vulnerability of children from infancy throughout their childhood, coupled with their dependency on the adult members of the family for survival and nurturing ,puts them at risk of neglect and increases their risk of being sexually abused. Studies on possible factors that are related to child sexual abuse have been carried out in developed countries such as the United States of America, and Britain. Some studies have also been carried out in South Africa but very few have been carried out in Zimbabwe at a micro level of the family as a social unit.

There are varying schools of thought on the origins of child sexual abuse. Most theories that relate to child sexual abuse recognize that the root causes of the problem can be organized into a framework of four principal systems and these are: the child, the family ,the community and socio-cultural practices,(U.S.Department of Health and Human Services ,1993).Child sexual abuse does not occur in a vacuum. Usually the dominant context of possible sexual abuse of the child is the child's immediate family and extended family (All Africa Report 2010). Research has also established that children are most susceptible to abuse by people who are close to them and have power over them (Gwirayi,2010).People who are often close to the children within a family set up are the parents, guardians of the children as well as other members of the extended family. With regards to the importance of the family ,the attachment theory states that the child should grow up in a family environment characterized by an atmosphere of happiness ,love and understanding to ensure a full and harmonious development of the child's personality (Gleitman,1995).On the same note ,the United Nations ,in its declaration of human rights proclaimed that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance. What this implies is that many fundamental aspects of the child's emotional well-being, including trust, esteem, self efficacy and relationships rest on the attachment of the child to a responsible family.

The U.S department of Health and Human Services (2003) cited the structure of some families as a contributing factor towards child sexual abuse. On a similar note, Chiremba and Makore-Rukuni (2002) point out that the traditional African family ,which they argue ,was protective and caring, has disintegrated and has given way to various family structures some of which are not conducive for child safety. Mpofu, Chiremba and Kent (2003) cite child headed families as being unfavorable to the growing child as they live the child to his/her own wits in a society that is full of pitfalls for the young.

Existing economic hardships have forced most parents into tight work schedules that see them spending most of their time away from home. The children meanwhile are left in the care of child minders, who usually turn out to be the

sexual abusers themselves. High levels of poverty underlie children's vulnerability to child sexual abuse, (All Africa Report 2010). Wood and Jeukes point out that child sexual abuse occurs in all social strata. However, he notes that children in disrupted, isolated and economically poor families are at risk of sexual abuse more than those youngsters in more stable families. On the same note, Chiremba and Makore-Rukuni (2002) point out that poverty within families has in the past led to the traditional practice of marrying off girl children in exchange for food, a practice which aggravated the problem of child sexual abuse. However, the current practices of alleviating poverty have since shifted from girl child marriages to forcing the children into early employment as child minders or herd boys within families that they do not belong to. This practice leaves the children vulnerable to child sexual abuse within the families in which they are employed and also risk being abused by other members of the communities within which they are employed (Glasser, Kolvin and Campbell, 2001).

Permissive parenting styles often impact on children's welfare and security, making them vulnerable to sexual abuse. Parents who give children too much freedom and fail to monitor their activities put the children at risk of being sexually abused. Children who are exposed to uncontrolled internet use become easy victims of child sexual exploitation as the internet is a one-stop hunting place for sexual predators, (Awake, 2008). Glasser, Kolvin and Campbell, (2001) further argue that children who are exposed to sexual knowledge early in life do not get unsettled easily when they are interacting with adults who reflect an interest in sexual issues and that way they become easy prey.

Certain personality factors within the parents have also been linked to child sexual abuse. For instance, recent studies have established a link between having a history of child sexual abuse and the possibility of becoming a sexual offender in life, (Dililo, Tremblay and Peterson, 2000). These authors argue that the abuse may be an attempt by the abuser to re-live his/her childhood experiences with power roles reversed. Parents who abuse substances like drugs and alcohol may also put their children at risk of being sexually abused.

Although legislation exists on child protection in Zimbabwe, the laws are not always respected and courts of law rarely deal severely with the abusers, (Girl Child Network, Zimbabwe, 2004). Kavishe, (2006) reports that there is an escalation in child sexual abuse cases in Zimbabwe. He reports that fifty two girls were sexually abused in a Marondera boarding school. On a similar note, Mapimhidze, 2009, reported that there was a disturbing rise in child sexual abuse cases in Chipinge. All Africa Report (2010), also reported that an alarming twenty thousand cases of

child sexual abuse were recorded in six provinces in the past eight years. This paints a very grave picture of the gravity of child sexual abuse in Zimbabwe.

Most educators are parents themselves, and their jobs demand that they have an in depth background of the family backgrounds of the children in their care. Kaizer (2011) argues that substantial incidents of child sexual abuse occur within the family set up and so it is unlikely that adequate prevention messages filter to the children through the home, so the school and educators in particular play a central role in ensuring prevention of child sexual abuse by giving comprehensive life skills to the children on the processes, contexts and conditions that make it possible for children to be sexually abused. The Girl Child Network (2004) also emphasized the role played by educators in preventing incidents of child sexual abuse in their communities. It is in the light of these sentiments on the part played by educators that the study sought to establish educators' perceptions of family risk factors associated with child sexual abuse in Gweru urban primary schools. This study sought to explore the perceptions of educators with regards to family factors that are associated with child sexual abuse in Gweru urban primary schools.

Methodology

The descriptive survey design was employed to explore the educators' perceptions of family factors that are associated with child sexual abuse. The design was deemed to be appropriate as it allowed the use of multiple instruments to gather data. The research was on perceptions and so it was necessary to use a design that that allowed for an in depth exploration of the educators's perceptions.

The population was made up teachers and heads of schools from primary schools in Gweru urban. The sample was drawn from five randomly selected primary schools out of a total of fifteen primary schools in the city. It was important to make a random selection of the schools to ensure a fair representation. There were thirty participants in the sample comprising of five school heads and twenty five teachers. All the participants were purposively selected. Purposive sampling was used to select the twenty five teachers because it was important to select qualified teachers who had been in the service for five years and above and were also of a predisposition that made it easy for children to confide in them. Teachers are also expected by their parent ministry to gather detailed information on every child's family and home background so they were considered as reliable sources of information. School heads were also considered to be key informants because by virtue of their positions as administrators they worked closely with the police and the social welfare department and so they were likely to possess information

concerning learners in their schools. This made them rich sources of information since they are privy to all issues relating to the welfare of their students in the schools. In Best and Khan's (1993) view purposive sampling targets only those potential participants who possess the desired information and are likely to be sufficiently interested in responding conscientiously and effectively.

A questionnaire and an interview guide were the two instruments used to gather data. The school heads responded to face to face interviews that were aimed at establishing their perceptions of the family factors that were associated with child sexual abuse. Gray (2004) argues that the interview allows the interviewer to carefully motivate the interviewee to give information that they would not probably reveal under normal circumstances. The teachers responded to a questionnaire that solicited for information relating to their perceptions of factors that are associated with child sexual abuse while school heads answered similar questions during face to face interviews. Using the two instruments was an attempt to triangulate the responses. The questionnaire for the teachers comprised both closed and open ended questions which enabled the researcher to gather large quantities of data within a reasonable space of time, (Oppenheim, 2006).

After permission was granted by the Ministry to conduct the study, the researcher visited the schools to seek further permission and to make appointments both with the teachers and the school heads. Interviews were conducted in the school at a time convenient to the school heads. Questionnaires were personally administered by the researcher and the respondents were given a time span of two days in which to complete the questionnaires. These were collected personally by the researcher.

Data from questionnaires were analyzed manually. Questionnaire items were coded and combed for themes that emerged. Emerging ideas were put in categories under their respective themes. The data from interviews were analysed using the thematic content approach and the emerging themes were noted. The interview data was then presented verbatim while data from questionnaires were presented using tables and narratives.

Results and discussion

The findings are presented under the following themes: family type, poverty in the family, parenting styles and personality factors.

Teachers were asked to list the types of families that they thought were associated with high incidences of child sexual abuse. Their responses are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Teachers' perceptions of family types that put children at risk of sexual abuse

n=25

Type of family	Frequency	Percentage frequency
Nuclear families with both parents and their offspring	10	40
Nuclear family with a single parent and offspring	25	100
Nuclear families with both parents but also caring for orphaned children	25	100
Child headed families	25	100
Granny headed families	20	80
Nuclear family living with other members of the extended families	15	60
Nuclear families where one of the parents has brought child(ren) from another relationship into their new union	25	100

Table 1 indicates that teachers perceived child sexual abuse as a problem that could occur in a variety of family types as evidenced by the diversity of family types they listed as being associated with high incidences of child sexual abuse. These results confirm Kaizer (2011)'s view that substantial incidents of child sexual abuse occur within the family set up. However the number of those who perceived nuclear families that lived with their offspring only was notably low when compared to other responses. This could be attributed to the fact that people perceive such families as comprising of members who are closely linked by bonds of birth and marriage and so they are least considered as risk families. However, empirical evidence reflects that all family types are fertile ground for child sexual abuse regardless of their composition (Kaizer,2011).

The teachers were also asked to indicate the type of families they thought put children at high risk of being sexually abused by ranking such families one to five where one indicated a very high risk family, two indicated a high risk family, three indicated mediocre risk family four indicated a low risk family and five indicated very low risk family. Table 2 shows the teachers' responses to the question.

Table 2: Risk families according to ranking n=25

Family Type	% Responses	Rank Order
Child headed families	96	1
Nuclear families where one of the parents has brought child(ren) from another relationship into their new union	84	2
Nuclear families with both parents but also caring for orphaned children	80	3
Granny headed families	76	4
Nuclear family with a single parent and offspring	68	5

Children living in child headed families are at a very high risk of being sexually abused as they were ranked number one risk family as depicted on table 2. One can conclude that these children lack the necessary adult protection that they so much need because such children are left to fend for themselves as well as being expected to make decisions that affect their lives without any adult input. In an interview two of the school heads expressed the following sentiments about children in child headed families:

School head B: *Many children within the surrounding community live on their own because both their parents have died—Nobody in the community, not even the children's relatives are prepared to care for them. So they indulge in behaviors that expose them to child sexual abusers.*

However school head B further added a new dimension to the problem of child headed families when he said: *Eh—vamwe vana hadzisinherera nemhaka yekufirwa kwete. Vamwe vabereki vakasiya vana varivega vakaenda kunoshanda kune dzimwe nyika. (Some children are not orphans a result of death, no. Some parents left children on their own and went to work in other countries.) The children are left on their own and mari vonotumirwa yakawnda chaizvo (they send them lots of money). Such children indulge in all sorts of activities some of which live them exposed to sexual abuse. Muraini medu uripo mujaya akatoroorwa nemusikana ane sixteen years (Near our home there is a young man who has been married by a sixteen year old girl.) Arikudya mari naye vaberiki havapo. (He is spending the money with her, the parents are not there)*

This response further points to the fact that it is not orphanhood alone that leads

children to live in child headed families and risk being sexually abused. Absent-parenting is also a contributing factor. Children are left to rely on their own judgments too early in life and often it is such children who fall prey to predators who are bent on sexually abusing them. School head B's views were further emphasized by School head C who said:

School head C : *The traditional family structure was very protective of children. Nherera dzakanga dzingasari babani (orphans were not left on their own) a situation which exposes them to all social hazards .A child belonged to every adult member of the community in the absence of an adult figure another adult quickly came in to assume the role of leader.*

On being asked whether they thought all the children who were being sexually abused were living on their own the school heads had this to say:

School head A: *Kwete. The situation is more complicated than that. There are families who have taken in children who are orphaned. A number of these children are not safe in these families as some members of the family view them as outsiders and so they can sexually abuse them because they are not family.*

School head B also added: *Nherera dzinobatwa nevana vedu mudzimba umu. (Orphans are sexually abused by our own children). Right now the police are handling an abuse case where a ten year old girl was sexually abused by her uncle's son and she was threatened with being chased away from the home if she ever talked about it. Zvirikutoitika zvakadaro. Chero vanhu vakuruwo (Such things are happening Even adults will use the same threat to abuse these children).*

The sentiments expressed by the school heads concur with the teachers's views that it is children in child headed families who are mostly at risk of child sexual abuse. It is also evident from the school heads' responses that the problem of child sexual abuse is not only rampant in child headed family types alone .Orphaned children who live with relatives in an intact family are at risk of being sexually abused. School head C's sentiments seem to echoe ,Chiremba and Makore –Rukuni (2002) who bemoan the disintegration of the traditional African family which they claim was protective of the child.

Teachers also indicated children who live with a parent who has entered into a new union as being at a high risk of being abused. Two school heads also concurred. School head D had this to say:

School head D: *Vanhu vanoshasmisa. Varipo varume vano funga kuti mwanasikan wemudzimai wavarooro haazi mawana wavo* (People are surprising. There are some men who think that their spouses 's children from another union are not their children). Rumors are rife in our neighborhood of men who sexually abuse their partners' girl children. It happens.

School head E said: *We have handled a case where a young woman who remarried was reported by her own husband to the police that she was sleeping with the husband's sixteen year old son. The boy said this had been happening ever since the boy had come to join the reconstituted family. This sounds like a story but it is real.*

It is apparent from both the teachers' rank and the head's comments that the family structure is central to child sexual abuse. Certain family types are not very conducive for child safety when it comes to issues of sexual relations. The All Africa Report (2010) clearly states that the dominant context of child sexual abuse is the child's family.

Poverty in the family

One of the items in the teachers' questionnaire was an open ended question in which the researcher wanted to establish the risky situations that children were exposed to as a result of poverty in the family. Teachers were further requested to explain how the situations they had mentioned were a risk to the children with regards to child sexual abuse. Table 3 depicts teachers risk situations and the possible ways in which children could become victims of child sexual abuse in each situation.

Risk situation	Possible effect on the child
Children living in shared accommodation	Can be abused by co-tenants
Male and female children sharing a bedroom	Older children can sexually abuse younger children
Children sharing a bedroom with their parents	Children might witness parents having sexual intercourse and imitate them
Children forced by poverty into early employment	Such children might be sexually abused by their employers
Children who sell items like cigarettes and eggs to adults in public places and Pubs	Such children might be sexually abused by their clients

The teachers' responses to this question were varied. However, all the responses pointed to the fact that poverty drove parents to make choices that exposed their children to possible sexual abuse. The teachers' responses were further clarified by the school heads in interviews. School head E had this to say about children who live in shared accommodation:

School head E: *This kind of set up is potentially dangerous for children as they are prone to sexual abuse from other tenants within the housing unit.*

School head C said: *There is no security for children living under such conditions. One does not choose a co-tenant. The chances that a family might share a house with a habitual rapist are high. Children are never safe in such situations.*

The sentiment expressed by school heads E and C were confirmed in a study by Wood and Jewks (1997) that established that in a clinic in one of South Africa's poor locations, 51% of the children who were undergoing treatment for sexual abuse had been abused either by adult co-tenants or other children living in the same housing unit with them.

Retorting to the question why it was risky for male and female children of the same family to share a bedroom, school head C went on to say: *Children are very complicated. You think they are angels but they are not. It is not safe to allow children to share a bedroom even if they are siblings. The possibility of elder children, whether male or female, abusing the younger children are high.*

School head D had this to say with regards to children sharing the same bedroom with their parents:

School head D: *Never believe that kids are asleep and they do not see anything. They will pretend to be asleep and yet watch everything that goes on you will get the shock of your life when the woman next door comes knocking on your doorstep to say your daughter or your son has sexual abused her child. It's possible with children when they are exposed to such.*

The implications of the above statements by the school heads were that poverty creates opportunities for children to be sexually abused by adults or to turn into sexual abusers themselves.

Sixty percent (60%) of the school heads also expressed the view that in cases of extreme poverty, sometimes parents encouraged their children seek employment

to supplement the family's income. This made children vulnerable to child sexual abuse at the hands of their employers or among themselves. School head E said: *Some employers turn out as abusers of their child employees. How many times have head stories told about male employees raping their maids who happen to be only children?*

Glasser, Kolvin and Campbell (2001) also noted that children who went into early employment were at very high risk of being sexually abused or being forced into prostitution.

Parenting Styles

As a follow up to issues raised in the literature that parenting styles contributed tremendously to incidents of child sexual abuse teachers were asked to explain how parenting styles contributed to child sexual abuse. Fifty four percent (54%) of the teachers said that parents who gave their children too much freedom and did not monitor their activities, increased their children's risks of being abused. Fifty two percent (52%) said that some parents were so permissive in their parenting styles that they did not monitor what their children watched on television. Such children could be watching programmes with sexually explicit films or pornographic videos that they would have sneaked into the home. Such children, the teachers further argued, were bound to imitate what they saw by trying it out with other children or worse still they would not be afraid trying it with any adult who made sexual advances at them. One school head also expressed the same view during an interview. School head A said: *Video tapes and late night films that children view without parental monitoring are not suitable for their age. The children end up trying out what they see on television.* On the same note, another school head was quoted as saying 'The most common cause of child sexual abuse these days is the availability of DVDs and video tapes that show explicit sexual acts. This influences children to regard sex very lightly and lose respect for themselves.' The point being emphasized by the responses above is that too much freedom for children especially leisure time, without parental monitoring, made them very vulnerable to child sexual abuse. Awake (2008) also argued that parents who do not monitor their children's use of the internet risk having them fall victim to sexual abuse on the internet which might culminate in them being physically sexually abused at some point. Furthermore, children who were not monitored ran the risk of associating with bad peers who might influence them to lose all self dignity and indulge in activities that might expose them to sexual predators.

Parental Personality factors

Teachers were also asked to indicate whether certain parental factors contributed to child sexual abuse. Four descriptors of parents adapted from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1993) were listed and the teachers had to indicate whether they agreed with the views expressed in the descriptors. Table 4 shows their responses.

Table 4 Teachers' views on parental personality factors that put children at risk of child sexual abuse.

Parental personality factors	Agree (Responses in %)	Disagree (responses in %)
Parents with a childhood history of having been sexually abused	96	4
Parents who abuse substances	92	6
Parents who fail to sustain their families because of poverty	84	16
Single parents who bring partners into the family home	52	48

The table below indicates that the majority of teachers perceive the first three descriptors out of the four descriptors as factors that can put children at risk of being sexually abused, while their views on the claim that single parents who brought partners into the family home were almost balanced with 52% agreeing with the view and 48% disagreeing. The views expressed by the teachers who cited parental history of childhood sexual abuse as a factor that might contribute to their own offspring becoming victims of child sexual abuse were also echoed by Higgs, Canavan, Walter and Meyer (2007) who argued that such parents were most likely to sexually abuse their own children. However one school head expressed dissent with the view that parents who had a history of childhood sexual abuse were likely to become abusers themselves. He said: *It does not always turn out that child sexual abusers were abused themselves. Sexually abusing your own child is more likely to occur among parents who abuse substances than among parents who were victims of abuse themselves.* However he would not be drawn to further justify his claim.

Conclusion

The study sought to establish the educators' perceptions of factors that are associated with child sexual abuse in Gweru urban primary schools. The study established that educators perceived the disintegration of the Zimbabwean traditional family set up as a contributing factor to children's risk of being abused. It was established in the study that educators perceived children who lived on their own either because they were orphaned or because their parents had died as being highly vulnerable to child sexual abuse. The study then concluded that such children were vulnerable to child sexual abuse because they lacked both parental guidance and parental protection. In some instances, the changes in the family structure have resulted in children living with relatives some of whom turn out as abusers. The educators also perceived grandparents as not being competent enough to look after grandchildren when their parents died or when they went to work outside the country probably because they thought they were too old to be alert and keep sexual predators at bay. The study concluded that perhaps some grandparents were often too old to protect children from potential abusers.

Levels of poverty in the family were also perceived as putting children at risk of being sexually abused as parents were forced to opt for shared accommodation and this sometimes exposed child to children sexual abuse. Besides parents in this situation would only be too keen to get their children into gainful employment to alleviate their poverty. Parenting styles and in particular permissive parenting styles were identified as putting children at risk of being sexually abused. It was established that children from such permissive homes engaged in activities that exposed them to child sexual abuse. The findings in this study confirmed findings made in earlier studies that factors that were associated with child sexual abuse were related to the family.

Recommendations

In light of the findings presented above the study made the following recommendations:

- There is need for school authorities to alert the Social Welfare Department of the presence of orphaned children or children living on their own so that adult protection and guidance may be sought for them
- There is need for government and non - governmental organizations dealing with children's welfare to step up concientisation campaigns for community

members to make them aware of the seriousness of child sexual abuse and the risk factors that aggravate the problem.

- Teachers need to receive professional training to identify and handle abused children and to be able to empower children to be able to lower the risk of being sexually abused.

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