

Contexts of Risk for Child Sexual abuse: Community Perspectives

Alice Clarfelt

CENTRE FOR AIDS DEVELOPMENT, RESEARCH
AND EVALUATION
aliceclarfelt@hotmail.com www.cadre.org.za



Economic dependency

Children living in poverty are easy targets for perpetrators, who can exploit their (often very basic) needs and meanwhile threaten them into silence. Typical perpetrators were reported to be neighbours or relatives, who would occupy a guardianship relation to the child in the absence of parental care. Mothers were reported to be passively complicit in the sexual abuse of their child, not speaking out for fear of losing financial support from the perpetrator. Transactional sexual relations between young teenage girls and 'sugar daddies' were reported to be common, and increasingly a social norm.

Customary practices: 'Paying for damages'

In rural areas the customary practice of 'paying for damages' is often preferred to getting the police involved, allowing a transaction between the family of the victim and the perpetrator to take place that will benefit the former financially. This can only happen when the perpetrator is not related to the victim, when they are not 'one blood'. Paying for damages grants the perpetrator his freedom, he is allowed to live in close proximity to the victim who is at risk of being abused again by the same man. In some cases it was reported that the perpetrator believes he has paid *lobola* for the victim, and is therefore entitled to continue to abuse her.

Social norms around gender and sexuality

Underlying social norms around gender and sexuality create spaces where acts of CSA can be legitimated, and at the same time disempower mothers and caregivers from speaking out against male perpetrators who are often direct relatives. Male sexual desire is generally perceived as something that cannot be controlled; perpetrators were described as becoming 'greedy' when seeing a child develop into an adolescent, or a child's genitalia. Men were also said to use a language of paternal sexual entitlement in reference to their children as their 'vegetables' which they were entitled to 'taste'. There was a lack of conception of non-penetrative sexual acts with children as being abusive.

Children abusing other children: Cycle of abuse

Teaching others 'how to have sex,' 'playing horse,' and 'playing rape' with other children were behaviours described in reference to sexual debut, but also as a consequence of a child having been sexually victimised or in some way made vulnerable, for example through neglect or maltreatment. Apart from being victims of CSA themselves, children who are sexually abusive of other children were frequently reported as having left home or being orphaned, with ultimately no one to turn to.

Poor access to and uptake of services for CSA

Communities had extremely limited access to appropriate services to create safe environments for children. Lack of arrest and conviction of perpetrators meant that they would continue to inhabit the same location as the children they have assaulted, and therefore were likely to repeatedly sexually abuse and torment their victims. Victims and witnesses lacked the information and resources necessary to follow the case of CSA through to trial.

Health services were available like treatment for injury and STIs, but centrally located and not easily accessible to community inhabitants. Meanwhile, the lack of social services for victims of CSA, such as professional and on-going counselling, contributes to post-traumatic psychological sequelae, which may reach advanced stages. The hidden and stigmatised nature of CSA, as well as often preferred customary methods of resolving the issue, means that the abuse often goes unreported to relevant services. However it is also largely due to poor availability of child-friendly sexual assault services.

Background: Child sexual abuse and HIV

The objective of the overall research project was to develop informational and support resources for the management of child sexual abuse in relation to HIV infection risk in South Africa.

The broad goal was to develop a coherent understanding of the contexts of risk of HIV infection of children as a product of sexual abuse, and to develop resources, including communications strategies and materials about risks and rights, designed to mitigate the impacts of such abuse.

Community case studies of contexts of risk were undertaken, exploring the diversity of contexts of risk for child sexual abuse and HIV vulnerability.

Contexts of risk: Community case studies

Qualitative research conducted in the rural Eastern Cape and peri-urban Western Cape, investigating social contexts of risk for child sexual abuse through the perspectives of community inhabitants and local service providers.

Objectives

- To understand the nature and manifestation of child sexual abuse in rural and urban community contexts
- To identify and categorise types of CSA, emerging trends & patterns of risk and contextual factors contributing to HIV risk.
- To inform policy and contribute to appropriate, effective child sexual abuse interventions.

Research sites and methods

Rural sites were over-populated, scattered communities located in the Eastern Cape.

Peri-urban sites were townships located in the Western Cape, which were characterised by high levels of crime, unemployment, and poor housing and sanitation.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews with community participants grandmothers, mothers, community health workers, child care workers, community police forum representatives, and traditional leaders.

Also with Service delivery workers such as health workers, police officers, social workers, and teachers.



Findings

Intra-familial abuse: Stigma and silence

Sexual abuse of children by relatives was reported to be the most prevalent and hidden form of abuse, often fathers or uncles. Fear of being stigmatised by the community, together with patriarchal gender relations and dependency on a male bread-winner, prevented children and their maternal caregivers from speaking out about the abuse. Communities and service providers are afraid to intervene when families keep abuse hidden, for fear of threats and abuse from parents or guardians.

Shifts in guardianship care environments

Shifts in household care environments create a diversity of risk contexts. Perpetrators were said to take advantage of overburdened grandmothers, who lack capacity to care for the child. New sexual partners of a single parent moving into the household were reported to abuse children. A common risk factor was the absence of biological mothers, often necessitated by mothers seeking employment. Children are often at risk of being abused by adults or even other children who are meant to be in a care or protective relationship with the child victim.

Participatory research dissemination workshop

CADRE returned to research sites to disseminate findings back to participants. A participatory workshop or 'community dialogue' was planned as a space where findings could be communicated alongside activities designed to trigger critical dialogue over CSA and collaboration and action-planning for the way forward.

Objectives

- To create a safe space to discuss child sexual abuse and to encourage identification with and ownership of research findings
- To facilitate critical dialogue around child sexual abuse, and understanding of its underlying causes.
- To build crucial networks between communities and service providers around child protection and sexual assault
- To develop an action plan for the community / district

Participants

Participants included community inhabitants and service providers involved in sexual assault and child protection.

Process

Participatory methodologies were used including:

- Story-telling
- Problem-trees looking at causes and consequences of child sexual abuse
- A matrix chart of who is doing what to address child sexual abuse, and how well
- Action planning and a 3 pile sort to decide who can do what to address child sexual abuse
- One year goals



What was achieved?

Critical insight into key issues and underlying causes was achieved, such as mother's silencing child victims due to economic dependency, and men becoming alienated from their families due to economic migration.

Identification with and ownership of CADRE research findings

Dialogue and contestation

Debates around the role that NGOs and government services are providing – communities challenging service providers, differences were expressed around corporal punishment as a means of disciplining children, and the role of men in child care.

Collaboration and action planning

Priority areas were identified, including intensive work with families, and the need to create safe spaces for victims in courts and police stations. Collaboration was achieved, with a child abuse steering committee being formed at one of the sites. Actions were decided upon including staging a march against sexual violence and organising parenting workshops and teacher training.

Conclusion

Community case studies reveal the diversity of ways children are at risk of being sexually abused. Child sexual abuse is underpinned by social norms and traditional practices, together with lack of service provision and situations of severe economic dependency.

Community dialogues can be a useful tool for disseminating research back to participants, and a catalyst for inter-sectoral collaboration to take action against child sexual abuse.