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Challenges Facing Reporting of Child Sexual Abuse in Kibera Slum, Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

This article examines challenges child sexual abuse victims and their families experience in trying to access healthcare services and justice in Kenya. Child sexual abuse is a vice that shocks and traumatizes the victims and undermines the status of children and women in any society. Yet it is largely suffered in silence. The study was designed to investigate challenges child sexual abuse victims and their families experience in trying to access healthcare services and justice in Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya. Data was collected by use of both qualitative and quantitative research designs with structured interviews and focus group discussions being the main techniques of data collection. A total of 105 respondents between the ages of 12 to 14 years were interviewed. The respondents included: 56 pupils from Olympic Primary school. 17 key informants and 32 Kibera slum community members from four villages namely Laini Saba, Lindi, Mashimoni and Kianda. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. There were various reasons cited by the respondents as being major challenges associated with reporting child sexual abuse. These included: fear of embarrassment and stigmatization, fear of family disintegration, lack of faith with the law enforcers, parents feeling that they were negligent, children fear that no one will believe them and children are too intimidated with threats by the abusers.

Key words: Child sexual abuse victims, challenges, stigmatization, Kibera slums in Nairobi, Kenya.

Introduction

Committee on the Rights of the Child convention, Article 19, requires action to protect children from “all forms of...maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse”. This is expanded in Article 34, which requires state parties to undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

Davo et al (1994:405), note that younger children tend to be abused for longer durations. They are closely related to the perpetrator than are older children. This may be the reason as to why children may not report sexual assault.

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Reported child sexual abuse cases show the average age of girl victims to be between eleven and twelve years. Foley and Davies (1983:376) note that a common [occurrence] The myth is challenged because research conducted by Peters et al (2003:29) found that often, child sexual abuse lasts for several years. It is only at eleven and twelve years of age that the child victim disclosed the abuse. This however, does not mean that there are never cases where child sexual abuse is reported at an early age.

Baglow (1990:190) note that the child may be required to testify against the offender and be secondarily victimized as a result This is because of the need by family members to safeguard the family unit from disintegration. Sometimes the mother of the sexually abused child is uninformed of the assault. She may remain silent for several reasons: physical abuse by the father or parent figure and fear of rejection may stop her from acting. This is because acting may lead to lack of economic and emotional support from the abuser. Kutash (1987:69) adds that the mother may perceive silence as the only mode of survival in the family.

Most sexually abused children want to and will leave home to *escape the abusive situation*. Most sexually abused children do not want to leave home. However, the children do wish the abuse ceased. Intrafamily sexual abuse is often only disclosed inadvertently or after the child has acquired enough independence to seek outside help.

The actual incidence of child sexual abuse is difficult to measure, since it is one of the most underreported forms of crime. It is estimated that only 10 to 20 per cent of the sexual abuse incidents are actually reported. Fear, embarrassment and concern about the possible response of social, medical and legal agencies most likely contribute to underreporting (Fogel and Lauer. 1990:14).

Child sexual abusers maintain children's collusion by positive motivations such as money, alcohol and drugs. Negative motivators used: threats of harm, blackmail and extortion. Burgess et al (1987:650). This control over the children is intense and therefore disclosure is most often indirect.

Fogel and Lauer (1990:542) note that sooner or later in most cases of child sexual abuse, some events break the cycle: discovery of pregnancy, rebellion by the victims, the victim's leaving home, divorce, a change in victim, or more rarely reporting of the problem to authorities. In incest cases, victims tend not to seek exposure of the problem they generally feel love for their fathers even when they are angry with them." This can be so since they may feel pain and guilt for humiliating and degrading their father and the threat of break-up of the family. "After reporting the situation the child may grieve the loss of her father or her intact family" (Faulk, 1994:234)

The mother of an incest victim who reports the problem often doubts her child, preferring to believe her husband instead (Geer et al, 1994:249). The mother too is threatened by the possible break-up of the family system and loss of financial support more so if the husband was the sole breadwinner. Farmer and Pollock (2003:120) agrees with Geer et al and note that maternal support is consistently mentioned as an important predictor of children's well being following disclosure of sexual abuse.

In case whereby family members believe the child, they often condemn the child for publicizing the problem. A vicious cycle of blaming is established and often the child who may be already feeling guilty bears it all. Mothers who become aware of child sexual assault of their daughters by their husbands, are often ashamed that they failed to protect their children or that they failed to see the signs and act on them. They blame themselves in addition to lashing out at their children and dealing with their husbands' guilt.

Methodology

The study was carried out through the adoption of a mixed research design [quantitative and qualitative research designs]. “This includes quantitative theory testing and verification or inductively as in emerging theory or pattern” (Creswell.2009, p.66) The population in this study consisted of the Kibera slum dwellers, primary school pupils of Olympic primary school and key informants.

The study combined probability and non-probability sampling techniques so as to select a representative sample. Non-probability sampling design was used to select four villages to be studied. In this case purposive sampling technique was used. In this case, purposive technique, the researcher relies on his expert judgment to select units or cases that are representative or typical of the population.

Four villages selected were: Laini -Saba, Kianda, Mashimoni and Lindi. The four villages were selected having taken into consideration their varying composition of ethnic groups that dominate each of the chosen villages. Stratified random sampling was used. In this type of design the population is first sub-divided into two or more mutually exclusive segments (strata) based on categories of one or a combination of relevant variables. Simple random samples are drawn from each stratum and this sub samples is joined or combined to form the stratified sample

Results and Discussion

Only 12% of the children who were sexually assaulted reported the abuse. Generally, of child sexual abuse do not report the assault as established by the study. For example, when an uncle raped a 6-year-old girl, the father opted to talk out the matter with his brother and no further action was taken “...we did not want embarrassment, so my husband just confronted the brother and that way it.” (Mother of a sexually abused girl, Kibera). About 66% respondents ranked fear of embarrassment stigmatization highest.

Personal reasons also contributed to the failure to report for example, “...we just want to forget about it and get on with our lives we have no money to waste following up the case” (Mother of a 9 year old who was sexually abused, Kianda).

Fear of family disintegration was ranked highest (66%) by the respondents as being the reason for failure to report the sexual assault. About 38% of the respondents noted that people fail to report cases of child sexual abuse because they did not have faith with the law enforcers. For example, one woman who went to report that her daughter had been sexually abused she was blamed for not protecting her daughter from sexual abuse and asked by the police to provide money for fuelling the police car so that they could get to the crime scene.

There were various reasons given for not reporting the abuse as shown in the table 2.

Table 1: Reasons for failure to report sexual abuse (multiple responses)

| Reason given | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|------------------|-------------------|
| Fear of embarrassment and stigmatization | 69 | 66 |
| Fear of family disintegration | 65 | 61 |
| Lack of faith with the law enforcers | 40 | 38 |
| Parents feeling that they were negligent | 12 | 11 |
| Children fear that no one will believe them | 48 | 46 |
| Children are too intimidated with threats by the abusers | 43 | 41 |
| Children may not know its wrong | 12 | 11 |

The study established that in child sexual abuse, the offenders are responsible for the sexual abuse contact. Children were found to go along with sexual relations and not report in most cases. The study established that this was due to little cognitive understanding or personality development of the child. The child's age or developmental status made the children incapable of using adult judgement to make decision relating to consent and sexual activity while other children did not know that sexual abuse was wrong. This is well illustrated by the case study below.

Tabitha⁵ aged 7 years was left in the custody of her uncle with her two brothers and two sisters by her parents who travelled up country over a weekend to attend a funeral. During the night Tabitha noticed that her uncle had put his hand on her leg, and with time was moving the hand up her leg. She became uncomfortable and glanced over the uncle who seemed to be asleep. Tabitha became confused and wondered. "does uncle know that he has his hand on me? May be he does not realise his hand is up my dress touching my private parts." She knew that something was unusual when she began to feel strange body sensations and thought the uncle should not be touching her private parts. She woke her sister aged 10 years who slept in the same floor mat and asked her the exchange sleeping places. As Tabitha moved, the uncle withdrew his hand and she did not discuss the matter in the morning with anyone (not even her sister).

The above case study shows how a child with limited concept of sexuality is not fully aware of the implications of the sexual contact and therefore she keeps it as a secret. The study also found out that some children (older ones) felt and knew that sexual activity between them and an adult is 'wrong' but were convinced by the offender that it is not wrong or they were intimidated with threats.

Young children are unsure or powerless in relation to an adult authority figure that pressurizes them to engage in sexual activity. Some children were rewarded for sexual contact through material goods (chips, sweets) and approval or affection.

Children who did not report sexual abuse were bound to by fear of not being believed (46%), fear of being blamed and fear of abandonment or rejection that could lead to family disintegration. This is because when the perpetrator is blamed for the intrafamily abuse, the result is often marital disruption.

The 12% of the children whose sexual abuse was reported was mainly because they had been injured and their mothers noticed change in behaviour, walking and profuse bleeding, which necessitated seeking medical care.

The status of the person who sexually abused the child, played a key role in deciding whether the offence would be reported. For example, a respondent whose nine-year-old girl had been sexually abused by the father chose not to report. The husband was the sole breadwinner in the family and she had no other person to support her financially. She was forced to report after the child contracted sexually transmitted infections. A 13 year old girl who was abused by the mother's lover ran away from home and told the grandmother who in turn reported the matter to a human rights activist who conducted civic education in their church during a *jumuia*⁶.

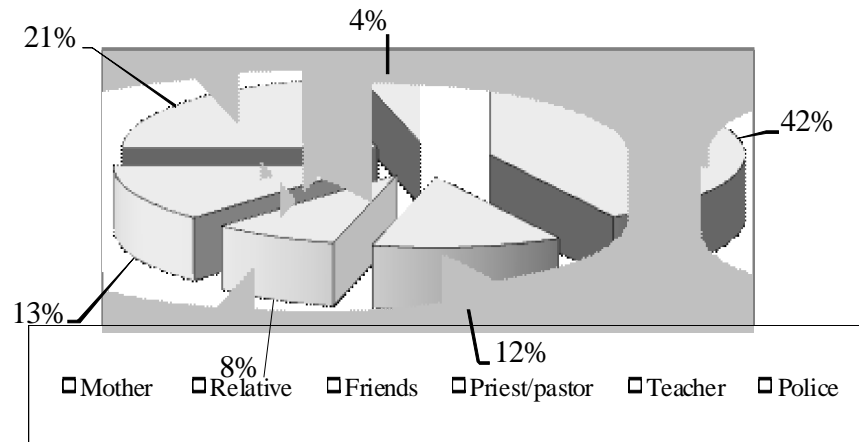
Among the pupils who were interviewed, 80% said that if family members abused them they would not report the incidence. About 66% of the pupils noted that they feared embarrassment and stigmatization. Fear of family disintegration was also a factor that was cited on why they respondents would not report sexual abuse if sexually abused by a family member.

⁵ Not her real name

The study found out that generally, the society holds sexual abuse victims (especially above the age of 12 years) responsible for their actions.

The rest said they would report to mother (42%), teacher (21%) these were the people with the highest percentages since they are the people whom the child interacts with most and they have already established child trust. Children also look up to their teachers for support and they see the teachers as a source of authority.

Pie chart 1: People to report to if sexually abused by the father



About 12% of the pupils said that they would report cases of child sexual abuse to relatives. The study found out that most of the pupils live in the same house or near each other with their relatives. A small number (8%) of the pupil respondents said that in cases if sexually assaulted they would report to their friends while (13%) would report to a priest! pastor. Only (4%) said that they would report to the police. This small percentage is attributed to the fact that young children are scared of police whom they know arrest and shoot people. The children are torn between their fathers' loyalty and therefore they would not want their fathers arrested or shot. This was attributed to the fact that after being defiled by the father a child does not have any more trust to confide and more so for people she hardly interacts with.

Conclusion

The study established that the prevalence of child sexual abuse among the respondents was about 56% among the respondents. The forms of sexual abuse reported included: incest, defilement, early child marriages, child prostitution and child pornography. Other forms also mentioned are sodomy and kidnapping of children with the intent to indecent harm. Generally victims of child sexual abuse and their families did not report the assaults despite that, 70% of the sexual abusers were known to them.

The sexual abusers were neighbours, parents, fathers and relatives. Out of the 56% cases of child sexual abuse that were acknowledged during the interview, only 12% were reported as was established by the study. Various reasons were given for the low reporting rate of child sexual abuse cases. The reasons include: fear of embarrassment and stigmatisation, fear of family disintegration, lack of faith with the law enforcers, children were too intimidated with fear and threats.

Recommendation

There is need for sustained public education on child sexual abuse. Education campaigns by both the public and the private sector on child sexual abuse prevention need to be intensified. Children should be sensitized that sexual abuse is a crime. The government needs to put more tools in place to combat the sexual abuse crime.

There is real need to sensitize people on the Children's Act. The study found that the Catholic Church in Kibera is playing a key part in educating the people on Family issues. Other churches should not shy off in discussing sexuality issues. This key role should be a joint venture between the government, religious organizations, schools and the entire society at large.

The community victims of child sexual abuse and their families should be sensitized to report cases of child sexual abuse. There is need to provide support within the social structure for abused children. The victims of child sexual abuse need not feel that help is not available which discourages them from reporting. Stiffer punishments should be meted on child sexual abusers.

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