Research Article

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Community Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Female Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse in Mazowe District of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore community perceptions and beliefs concerning female offenders of child sexual abuse within the Mazowe District of Zimbabwe. Typically, child sexual abuse is perceived as an offense predominantly perpetrated by males. This investigation employed a qualitative approach, gathering data from 42 participants through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Findings indicate that the incidence of child sexual abuse by women is prevalent in the Mazowe District. Furthermore, there appears to be a notable disconnect between the documented evidence of female-perpetrated abuse and the community's awareness of the issue. Participants exhibited skepticism regarding the severity of the problem and often perceived female offenders as less culpable than their male counterparts. Notably, sex workers were identified as the primary offenders in cases of child sexual abuse. The research highlighted that such abuse has detrimental health, social, and psychological effects on the affected children, their families, and the broader community. The community's inaction can be attributed to entrenched social norms and values that prioritize familial and community relationships while neglecting children's rights and protection. Participants tended to regard abuse by women as less severe, which may result in insufficient acknowledgment, reporting, and intervention from social services and the criminal justice system. This situation is concerning, as children victimized by female offenders may not receive the necessary support and protection.

Keywords: *Child sexual abuse, female perpetrator, child, perceptions, community, Mazowe District*

1. Introduction

This research examines community perceptions, specifically focusing on individuals' attitudes and beliefs concerning female-perpetrated Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). It identifies four key dimensions associated with the occurrence of female-perpetrated CSA, which emerged as significant underlying factors from the study's findings. The study further elaborates on and categorizes the typologies of female-perpetrated CSA prevalent in the Mazowe District, aligning them with the identified dimensions: symbolic, economic, power, and emotional. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) represents a

critical, often overlooked social-behavioral issue that impacts communities worldwide. It poses a persistent challenge that affects public health, societal norms, human rights, and security in contemporary society. The consequences of CSA can be severe, leading to both immediate and long-term health and social effects on victims, their families, and the broader community. According to Anderson et al. (2020), both adolescents and young children are frequently targeted by perpetrators of sexual abuse, regardless of gender. Research indicates that men account for ninety-six percent of sexual abuse offenses, while women are responsible for four percent (Anderson et al., 2020).

A significant rise in both general and female-perpetrated CSA has been observed in Zimbabwe. According to Muridzo et al. (2018), it is estimated that over 400,000 cases of CSA are reported annually in the country. Research conducted by Muridzo and Chikadzi (2020) indicates that 62.7% of females and 47.9% of males have experienced multiple incidents of sexual abuse before reaching the age of 18. The Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) has documented a steady increase in CSA cases, estimating that approximately 100 girls are victimized each day. Consequently, the issue of CSA remains highly pertinent in Zimbabwe (Nyamanhindi, 2015; Mantula & Saloojee, 2016). The ZRP report from 2012, referenced in Muridzo (2014), highlighted that over 2,400 children under 18 were victims of sexual abuse from January to October of that year, with a total of 3,421 CSA cases reported throughout 2012. Muridzo and Chikadzi (2020) attribute the heightened vulnerability of children to CSA primarily to ongoing economic difficulties, which exacerbate poverty and increase risk factors. Additionally, the Zimbabwe Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS) (2012) reveals that 34% of females aged 15-19 who reported sexual abuse experienced it before the age of 15. Media reports frequently highlight cases involving intimate acquaintances, family members, educators, community members, and, in some instances, women perpetrating abuse against minors (Mantula & Saloojee, 2016).

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study will be guided by the socio-ecological theory.

2.1 The Socio-Ecological Model

The bio-ecological model, formulated by Bronfenbrenner in 1979, posits that an individual's development is the result of the dynamic interplay between their environment and inherent traits. To gain a comprehensive understanding of a child's development, Bronfenbrenner emphasized the importance of analyzing the child within the context of multiple ecological systems, which include the microsystem (the immediate environment), mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1990). This study notably employs the socio-ecological model to devise holistic intervention strategies that systematically address mechanisms of change across various levels of influence among diverse population groups. Investigating the social perceptions of female perpetrators of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Mazowe District of Zimbabwe facilitates an understanding of the behaviors associated with CSA among females. This exploration also highlights the interconnectedness of individual development and environmental factors in the emergence and perpetuation of female perpetrators of CSA, alongside the societal consensus on social perceptions, which encompass artifacts, belief systems, attitudes, and social norms related to this issue. The primary environment that shapes an individual's development is their biological makeup. The growth of an individual is driven and directed by the interaction of biological factors, immediate family dynamics (including significant relationships), community context, and broader societal influences. It is anticipated that multi-level intervention models addressing CSA will be informed by the bio-ecological framework, aiming to effect change at various levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1990).

Social-ecological models are recognized as valuable frameworks for comprehensively understanding the various and interconnected factors that influence health and social behaviors (Glanz et al., 2008; Stokols, 1992). The ecological model of social behavior highlights the significance

of environmental and policy contexts while integrating psychological and social influences. This ecological perspective has led to the development of more effective community-based interventions by taking into account multiple levels of impact (Green & Kreuter, 2005; Porter, 2016). Central to the ecological model in health and social sciences is the notion that social perceptions and human behaviors are shaped by various levels, including intrapersonal, interpersonal/mesosystem, macro, exo, and chrono systems (Glanz et al., 2008; Porter, 2016; Green & Kreuter, 2005). This model acknowledges the intricate interactions among societal, relational, community, and individual factors. It enables professionals in peace and development to understand the diverse variables that can either protect individuals from the perpetration of child sexual abuse (CSA) or expose them to risk (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dahlberg & Krug, 2002), which is why it has been adopted in this study. Based on the contextual information regarding the existential circumstances of female-perpetrated CSA, Freire (2012) argues that CSA dehumanizes specific segments of the population, affecting both direct and indirect victims, with this distortion being linked to historical, cultural, and contextual factors. Consequently, individuals impacted by the dehumanization associated with female-perpetrated CSA, which is often tied to despair, poverty, mental health issues, and the perpetrator's misguided sense of generosity, should adopt a humanistic approach to liberate themselves from these detrimental practices (Freire, 2012). As argued by Freire (2012), the socio-ecological model invites the holistic approach that subsumes dialogical and dialectical approaches to community awareness and vocation.

2.2 Defining Child Sexual Abuse

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014), as referenced in the works of Srivastava et al. (2017) and Mathews & Collin-Vezina (2019, p. 136), child sexual abuse (CSA) is characterized as the involvement of a child in sexual activities that they do not fully understand, are incapable of providing informed consent for, or are not developmentally equipped to consent to. Such activities may also contravene societal laws or norms. CSA typically occurs between a child and an adult or another child who holds a position of responsibility, trust, or power, with the intent of fulfilling the sexual desires of the older individual. This definition encompasses a range of behaviors, including but not limited to: coercing or enticing a child into illegal sexual acts; exploiting a child for prostitution or other illicit sexual activities; and utilizing children in pornographic performances or materials. Additional sexual behaviors involving minors or adolescents may consist of fondling, exposing oneself, engaging in sexual intercourse (vaginal, oral, or anal), sharing pornographic content, sex trafficking, or any other sexual conduct that could inflict psychological, physical, or emotional harm on a child (Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2019). The WHO's definition from 2014 addresses multiple dimensions of CSA, suggesting that interventions should align with the guidelines established in the original WHO (1999) definition.

The definitions of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) vary significantly across different research studies, leading to a wide range of interpretations of this social phenomenon. Some investigations utilize varying age thresholds, while others differ in their criteria for what constitutes abusive sexual behavior. According to Pereda et al. (2009), researchers examining sexual abuse have adopted diverse criteria for defining childhood sexual abuse, including the age at which childhood is considered to end, the specific nature of the abusive acts, and the age difference between the perpetrator and the victim. Despite the broad spectrum of CSA definitions, it is generally recognized as any sexual behavior or act occurring during childhood or adolescence, specifically before the age of 18, involving a perpetrator who may be an adult or another child (Hillis et al., 2001; Bensley et al., 2000). Mathews and Collin-Vezina (2019) have pinpointed five critical areas of concern regarding a unified understanding of CSA. The first area pertains to the generation of knowledge and research methodologies. The disparate definitions of CSA in studies focusing on prevalence, causes, and consequences have led to considerable inconsistencies in findings related to this issue, complicating efforts to establish a coherent understanding of its prevalence over time.

Mathews and Collin-Vezina (2019) identify a second issue related to the legal domain. The legal framework encounters numerous challenges that are essential for the identification, management, and prevention of child sexual abuse. Numerous legal statutes prohibit specific actions and provide remedies for societal violations, thereby establishing behavioral norms. One notable aspect of CSA pertains to civil law compensation for injuries. Criminal law focuses on the prosecution of offenders, while child protection laws aim to identify and prevent instances of child sexual abuse. Additionally, telecommunications law prohibits the dissemination of information regarding child sexual abuse through electronic media. Constitutional law imposes restrictions on free speech by criminalizing the possession and distribution of CSA materials, and professional licensing regulations serve to keep offenders away from children. A significant operational challenge across these areas is the conceptual ambiguity surrounding CSA, as there is no universally accepted definition. The third issue pertains to preventive initiatives, which often encompass a range of objectives. These initiatives target children, offenders, parents or guardians, institutions, and the broader community. The effectiveness and theoretical foundation of these approaches can vary significantly based on the specific elements included in the CSA concept. Moreover, policy strategies and preventive measures may necessitate diverse methodologies and content, contingent upon the conceptualization and operational definition of CSA. This variability also extends to therapeutic interventions, such as counseling and psychosocial support (Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2019).

2.3 Defining Female Sexual Perpetrators (FSP)

Sexual abuse perpetrated by women, often referred to as female sexual predators FSPs, is frequently met with societal denial and a narrow understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse. Many individuals mistakenly equate sexual abuse solely with the traditional notion of forced vaginal penetration, overlooking the broader spectrum of abusive behaviors. Women engage in various forms of sexual abuse similar to their male counterparts, which can include sexual stalking, inappropriate touching, harassment, oral-genital contact, sexual intercourse, digital penetration, and masturbation, among other forms. These acts are often perpetrated against victims by FSPs. When such abuses occur involving adolescent victims, they are sometimes framed by the perpetrators as a form of privileged access to sexual experiences. Notably, research indicates that nearly 50% of these incidents involve a co-perpetrator who is not present during the act (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022; Cain, 2013).

3. Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was employed in this study, representing a form of inquiry that examines phenomena within their natural contexts. This approach utilizes various methods to interpret, comprehend, elucidate, and ascribe meaning to these phenomena (Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Myers, 2009). The research adopted a purposive sampling technique, which entails the selection of sources that are likely to provide rich information (Patton, 2015). This method was specifically utilized to identify service providers, and the following organizations participated in the study: the Zimbabwe Republic Police-Victim Friendly Unit (1x ZRP-VFU), Civil Society Organizations (3x CSOs) including Zimbabwe Health Interventions (1x ZHI), Centre for Sexual Health HIV and AIDS Research (1x Ceshhar), and Msasa Project (1x); the Ministry of Health and Child Care (2x MoHCC), the Department of Social Development (1x DSD), the National Aids Council (1x NAC), two traditional chiefs, local authority officials (2x Mazowe RDC), and community members comprising adolescents (12, with 8 participating in focus group discussions and 4 in in-depth interviews), parents (9), mature female sex workers (9), and community gatekeepers (traditional leaders), who possess extensive knowledge regarding the sexual practices prevalent in their communities. Purposive sampling was employed to identify and select pertinent documents for the research review. To elucidate the primary themes arising from the comments of various

participants, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted after a series of individual interviews (Kabir, 2016). The participants in the FGDs included parents and guardians of adolescents (9), mature adult Female Sex Workers (FSWs) (9), and adolescents (8). The documentary analysis served as a method for collecting secondary data, adhering to the established research questions and theoretical framework. This analysis encompassed a range of specific and general documents, including but not limited to books, journals, feasibility studies, international and regional conventions on child protection and sexual and reproductive health (SRH), domestic laws and policies, as well as national and program-specific strategic and annual implementation plans, budgets for adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) and sexual abuse interventions, media reports, and periodical articles.

4. Discussion of Findings

This section provides a discussion of the study findings.

4.1 Mazowe community perceptions regarding female perpetrators of CSA

The study identified the relationship between community perceptions, beliefs, and both individual and collective attitudes towards various social actions that impact their lives as members of humanity, including instances of child sexual abuse perpetrated by females. The findings align with DeVito (2016), who posits that social perception involves the pursuit of knowledge and the understanding of individuals as they engage within their families, communities, and broader society. This underscores the importance of object relations, self-concept, and self-theories, as well as the socio-ecological model, which serves as the theoretical framework for this investigation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; McLeod, 2017; Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Social perception is characterized as an active process, encompassing a series of actions that lead to the formation of impressions, including feelings, beliefs, and attitudes towards individuals and social groups (Chaiklin, 2011).

> *The Ceshhar Officer said;*
> *The communities have their own cultural beliefs they want to protect. It may have religious beliefs, and we have to protect our community. Society may not want such to come out because it may be taboo to talk about it. Talking about these issues erodes the norms and values of society. Talking about it may deem the community unfit, so they resort to keeping quiet.*

Additionally, the District Health Promotion Officer (DHPO) also highlighted that there are issues to do with rituals; people are accumulating riches by inflicting abuse. He said;

> *There is a belief, in the Mazowe community, that sexual intercourse with a youngster will yield prosperity. The community undertakes rituals, beliefs, and peer pressures that originate from their interaction with traditional healers and other peers in society. In rural areas, they use minors' money to gain sexual favours. Our youngsters travel long distances to school. The ladies will then offer transport to the minors, and then, in the end, forced sexual intercourse. We had such a scenario in Chief 2 communal areas where a woman slept with relatives, and these cases came out through community dialogues conducted at Rosa, and the dialogues also heard that a young boy was sleeping with his grandmother to make money and they had got the ideas from a traditional healer.*

Regarding the belief systems and attitudes that are embedded in social perceptions in Mazowe FSWs also mentioned that some FSPs are using them for monetary rituals. A participant in the FGD with FSWs lamented that;

> *Sometimes, as FSWs, we are taken to the graveyard by men who are the accomplices to the FSPs, who will be behind the scenes, and the men demand that they have sex there with us. Of course, they will then give us more money for these rituals, like, even USD500 for an encounter. They will then request that the sexual encounter be done on top of a grave. Normally, the time they request sex at graveyards*

is around 1 am or 3 am. And as a sex worker, I don't refuse such an amount. I am then instructed to go and never turn back till I reach my destination or home. After such an encounter, then I will start to meet misfortunes in life and question myself why I agreed in the first place, but it is because I need the money; hence I consent to the sexual encounter.

The results of this study suggest that government public officials may not be fully informed about the recent amendments to existing laws, particularly regarding the evolving legal status of witchcraft, which can now be contested in court if substantiated by evidence (Criminal Law Act, 2007, concerning witchcraft, sections vi; chapters 98 to 102). Furthermore, the research highlighted the interplay between community perspectives, beliefs, and the attitudes of individuals and groups towards various social phenomena, including cases of child sexual abuse perpetrated by women. Social perception is defined as the mechanism through which individuals gather information and understand one another during interactions within their families, communities, and broader society, a concept that is reinforced by the findings of this study.

4.2 Typologies of female perpetrated child sexual abuse

The research outcomes indicated that alongside females who have experienced child sexual abuse (CSA), male children in Mazowe are also subjected to sexual abuse perpetrated by females. The study identified various forms of female-perpetrated child sex trafficking, which encompassed the collection of sperm from male adolescents, the exhibition of pornographic materials, and the involvement of these children in the sex industry and other sexually explicit endeavors. This perspective was further enriched by insights gathered during an in-depth interview session, contributing to the discourse on the typology of female-perpetrated CSA.

An adolescent youth said;

As male youth, we are vulnerable; even the attire of our lady teachers at school makes us want to have sex, then the ladies with money come and lure us; I will not refuse; this is the reason why some of us end up staying with these prostitutes for even a month. (Lough.) They expose us to pornographic pictures and videos, and we are attracted to have sex because in the community and at school, we would have seen how the ladies will be dressed. Some of these old ladies with money, and sex take the condoms with sperm, and we don't know for what purpose; hence the issue of rituals and use of traditional medicines comes in. The female youth are attacked by the female old prostitutes to then have sex with sugar daddies with money, and this old lady is paid money for the services she would have done. So, these are some of the experiences the youth are meeting, especially in places like mining and farming settlements and in peri-urban areas like the ghettos of Glendale, Mvurwi, Concession and Nzwimbo. Here in rural areas, we mainly see it happening in the new mining settlements (Laughs).

In support of the above, one of the Chiefs stated that:

The forms of CSA that are prevalent in the community of Mazowe include; luring a child by enticing them to have sex. This is common among single mothers who sometimes operate with their male accomplices. They need to have their sexual desires fulfilled, so they take advantage of the young men by using vulgar language. There are those women who are single and want to be supported financially. They date sugar daddies to get money from offering sex. The man may end up getting attracted to the girl children and end up abusing them. Some loose mothers encourage young girls to be sexually active for the benefit of money. Economic hardships are the major cause of that. Women are quick to use their bodies to get money. Women end up coaching young girls to be sexually active. They are inducted into having sex at a very tender age.

The ZHI Program Officer said;

The practice of having external facilitators to CSA perpetrated by females is a common feature and is complicated to eradicate since it is not only the one on the fore but also the one behind the scenes who

must be dealt with. They mentioned that a response mechanism they are familiar with mainly deals with the one who perpetrates the CSA. The community, in general, does not consider the ones who spearhead the sexual abuse. It may be a woman facilitating the abuse. Sadly, they only focus on the male, and it is important for a paradigm shift at the community level. They must deal with the person who acts as a catalyst to these abuses and must be tried in a court of law. They would have committed an offense as well.

The study has revealed, corroborating findings from previous research that individuals who commit sexual offenses often engage in a duality of behavior. They tend to conceal their abusive actions while outwardly portraying themselves as affectionate, benevolent, likable, and charismatic. However, in private settings, they may exhibit traits of cruelty, violence, manipulation, and undermining behavior. Research indicates that many sexual offenders display high levels of impulsivity, which leads to a failure to consider the repercussions of their actions before their occurrence (Lim et al., 2021). Conversely, some offenders engage in premeditated planning before executing their acts. Additionally, a deficiency in healthy coping mechanisms is frequently noted among sexual perpetrators and offenders (Lim et al., 2021).

4.3 The cycle of sexual abuse as an underlying factor in child sexual abuse

According to the study findings, underage marriages, prostitution, and sexual abuse are all perpetuated in the district as a result of CSA. This came out during the in-depth interviews with one of the adolescent girls who said;

Our generation is severely affected, especially girls; after the sexual abuse, the victim will begin to like it, and they either opt for early marriage or become prostitutes and start enjoying it. Lough. On this practice and adverse experience, the boys are not spared; they end up frequenting Rosa Business Centre for sex workers. It's sad, as the results are that they will then be absent from school lessons, and the pass rates will be very low. This is why you find the pass rates in our local schools are quite low. I am therefore appealing to the authorities in education to strengthen their supervision in schools so that they reduce days of absenteeism.

The Gender Focal Person (GFP) from Mazowe RDC also echoed the point that;

Even though females are known as nurturers and caregivers, they are sexually abusing children and as an underlying factor, a cycle of sexual abuse has been identified as an important antecedent, someone may have been abused during their childhood, and their self will always inform them to revenge. Those yester decade victims then become perpetrators of CSA themselves. Sometimes, it is due to a sense of hatred, which stems from them not having their biological parents. If someone had a normal childhood, she may not have been a perpetrator of CSA.

During the FGD session, an FSW said;

Because of such practices, the community silently oils and enables the continuous CSA by females in places like Mazowe-Jumbo mine, Rosa, Glendale, and commercial farming areas. We cannot out rightly mention that these activities are allowed, but because no authority is prohibiting it, it means it's allowed.

The results of the study suggest that the negative consequences of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CSA) should be examined at both individual and societal levels, with response strategies needing to incorporate these factors across all dimensions of the socio-ecological framework. The observation that CSA victims are more likely to become perpetrators themselves aligns with the findings of Muridzo (2017), who noted that extending intervention services to encompass other societal systems, including family members, can effectively disrupt this cycle. These study results support the theoretical foundations of the research, particularly the self-object theories

and the socio-ecological model, which indicate that individuals, often trapped in a cycle of poverty, may unconsciously align with the negative influences of female CSA perpetrators. The primary environment shaping an individual's development is their biological makeup, with growth being influenced by the complex interactions among biological factors, immediate family dynamics, community context, and broader societal conditions.

4.4 Mazowe's status of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse

The findings derived from three focus group discussions (FGDs) involving parents of adolescent children, female sex workers (FSWs), and adolescent children, along with insights from key informants and adolescents through in-depth interviews, revealed a consensus on community perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes towards female-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CSA). The study highlighted that women are indeed engaging in the sexual abuse of children and possess a greater awareness of the issue compared to government officials and professionals from development partners and civil society organizations (CSOs).

One adolescent girl, during the in-depth interview, said;

> *Indeed, these sexual abuses are prevalent in our communities. But they are kept silent, nobody wants to talk about it; I don't know what made you bring up such an important subject. Our leadership, parents, and guardians do not talk about it. Teachers sometimes talk about it, here and there during guidance lessons, but those lessons we do not have them frequently. So, it is something in the periphery. NGOs working in our areas, like "Sinovuyo", always talk about it only to the girls who are members of the groups. The challenge is that no one knows the magnitude of the problem.*

The study, through the FGD with parents of adolescent children, acknowledged that CSA by female perpetrators is evident in the Mazowe District. One parent reported that;

> *The FSPs, who are mainly the FSWs, influence the dress of these young girls. Even young boys, it is being seen that they end up being sexually abused by elderly women and may end up contracting HIV and STIs after indulging in unprotected sex. We, as parents, are very much concerned and worried as a community because of these happenings in this area since we have male and female adolescent children. The village heads and headmen are failing to handle this situation of female-perpetrated CSA in their areas. When stepfathers sexually abuse a child, the wife may convince the child to drop the case as the father will be the sole breadwinner, resulting in the child dropping or withdrawing the case. This entails that CSA is happening in Mazowe.*

4.5 Symbolic attributes associated with female perpetrated child sexual abuse

The social and cultural obstacles that hindered victims from reaching out to appropriate agencies for assistance were associated with the symbolic aspect. In such instances, both the victims and the Mazowe communities tend to remain reticent. This observation suggests that cultural factors, belief systems, attitudes, and societal values play a crucial role in both the perpetration and prevention of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse.

ZHI Program Officer informed the study that;

> *The communities have a positive attitude towards accepting reproductive and sexuality education within the education system but certain traditional cultures and values remain an inhibiting factor. It is the role of the government to collaborate and coordinate with key stakeholders to promote effective prevention strategies. In 2011, WHO (2011) brought forward recommendations to involve the health sector and facilitate the creation of programs that reduce the commission of CSA, and these included the considerations of community values, beliefs, and overall culture.*

The research findings recognize the existing literature that addresses gender-related issues. It underscores the notion that gender is primarily a social construct, shaped by the norms, values, and

roles prevalent in a specific society, culture, and historical context. Gender is characterized by the economic, social, political, and cultural attributes and opportunities linked to being identified as either a woman or a man. It represents a sociocultural expression of particular traits associated with an individual's sex and sexual orientation, which are tied to distinct social groups. Gender influences interpersonal interactions, the distribution of power and resources, as well as perceptions of self and others. Furthermore, gender relations are embedded within social frameworks and broader power dynamics, encompassing both interpersonal and intergroup interactions and relationships (Chrisler & Lamer, 2016; Barr et al., 2024).

4.6 Power attributes associated with female-perpetrated child sexual abuse

According to the study, there was a strong belief in male supremacy, which contributed to the rise in sexual abuse. Nonetheless, as norm systems evolved, so too were the power dynamics between men and women observed to be shifting. The study also revealed that some of the conventional gender and societal norms that condone sexual abuse have begun to be questioned by members of the community.

The DSD Officer informed the study that;

> *As part of this conversion, the struggle to uphold culture and traditional values was stronger, as they expected women to maintain a submissive position. At the institutional level, the study revealed that power relations were seen between the law enforcers and the sexual abuse victims, and the law enforcers would reject a case or refer the victim to community leaders for informal settlements such as compensation, assuming that the victim would have entered into some negotiations with the perpetrator, hence depriving them of justice.*

The Mazowe RDC Executive Officer also added that;

> *The power dimension was reflected profoundly at different levels. It was established that the ideology of male superiority was quite pronounced, leading to an increase in sexual abuse. Power relations between men and women were also seen to be changing as the norm systems changed. Community members had started challenging some of the traditional gender and social norms that support sexual abuse.*

This research indicates that to formulate effective preventive strategies, the government needs to engage with key stakeholders for coordination and collaboration. The World Health Organization (2012) has recommended the inclusion of the medical community in the development of initiatives aimed at preventing the exacerbation of CSA. While traditional customs pose significant challenges, there appears to be a consensus among parents and guardians in favor of implementing reproductive and sexuality education within school curricula. This study argues that the fourth level of the bio-ecological model, which addresses overarching societal factors influencing the creation of environments that either promote or deter CSA, aligns well with the proposed preventive framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These societal and cultural factors include norms that normalize CSA as a method for conflict resolution, sexual gratification, or the exertion of power over victims (Muridzo et al., 2021) assert that CSA is fundamentally an abuse of power.

4.7 Emotional attributes associated with female-perpetrated CSA

The study found that, both intrapersonal and interpersonally, emotional dimensions frequently clashed with symbolic and economic dimensions, resulting in poor behavior when seeking care services, especially those provided by the government and those involving parents, guardians, and even the adolescent children themselves.

The DNO said;

The majority of the CSA victims who report their ordeals narrate and display emotional, psychological, and physical reactions. Emotional reactions include, among other signs and symptoms, fear, mistrust, embarrassment, shame, guilt and self-blame, sadness, vulnerability, and isolation. Psychological reactions that we have experienced here in Mazowe include PTSD, depression, difficulty concentrating, flashbacks, and nightmares.

One participant in the FGD with FSWs said;

The women who come to Mazowe from outside areas are doing business using the young adolescent children, as they construct wooden cabins and rent them out to the young girls and their sexual clients. They don't care that their adverse sexual activities are causing emotional damage to the parents of the community. They always think about quick money only. Of course, sometimes we receive income-generating projects (IGPs) from government ministries that do not cover all the communities of need but are sporadically allocated and thinly spread, but that does not heal the emotional wounds for life. This has resulted in minimal impacts at the population level in terms of economic strengthening and empowerment.

The results of the current study are consistent with a cross-sectional study conducted in rural Tanzania by Abeid et al., (2014) on knowledge and attitudes regarding rape and child sexual abuse. The study revealed that the communities had tolerant attitudes toward sexual abuse and had limited understanding of the subject. This study finding is inconsistent with what Bee (1990:40) says "They are educated but not educated; they are apathetic, downtrodden and fatalistic in their attitudes."

5. Conclusion

The research focused on community attitudes and beliefs regarding female offenders of CSA in Mazowe. Findings indicate that the attitudes and beliefs of individuals, shaped through their interactions within social groups, play a crucial role in preventing CSA perpetrated by females. The study further established that community attitudes, beliefs, values, and perceptions are interconnected, encompassing issues such as corruption and bribery. Collectively, these elements contribute to the social norms that are prevalent within these groups, maintained through mechanisms of group approval or disapproval. This interactive dynamic is particularly relevant to the context of female-perpetrated CSA. Additionally, the research confirmed the existence of silent CSA committed by women, revealing that community members possess a clearer understanding of the situation than professionals do, and they do not endorse such behavior. This aligns with the findings of Clements et al. (2014), which highlighted the concerning trend of underreporting paedophilia crimes committed by women, influenced by societal perceptions of both the offenders and their victims. The investigation into community attitudes and beliefs surrounding female-perpetrated child sexual abuse (CSA) identified four key factors: symbolic, economic, power, and emotional dimensions. This finding aligns with the qualitative research conducted by Abeid et al. (2014) in rural Tanzania, which also highlighted four aspects of gender relations that relate to women's exploitation of their sexual positions. The current study corroborates the assertions made by Abeid et al. (2014), as the identified factors play a crucial role in exploring the intricate elements associated with female-perpetrated CSA in Mazowe. This suggests that these factors are prevalent within the district's communities affected by such abuse.

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