Journal of Social Work Education and Practice 6(3) 08-24 www.jswep.in
ISSN: 2456-2068 *July 1, 2021*

Child Sexual Abuse, Disclosure and Reintegration: Too Late or Too Soon

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ABSTRACT: There is a lot of news reporting in Nigeria on the sexual abuse of children, especially female children. Several of these abuses occur during domestic work or in children's family homes with perpetrators who could be close family members (parents, siblings or distant relatives), friends, neighbours, teachers or strangers. Bearing in mind that child sexual abuse is a social issue that could benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the problem, children facing sexual abuse are better positioned to provide critical insight into their diverse experiences and triggers. It is essential to speak to affected children to understand factors reinforcing their abuse and the nature of resources available and desired for effective reintegration or adjustment after exiting protection offered by anti-trafficking shelters. The paper interacts with African Centred approaches as studies indicate that the peculiarities of the African culture manifested in Ubuntu have a significant effect on the incidence and disclosure rates of child sexual abuse within the continent, the recently instituted Nigeria Sex Offender's Registry, and children's diverse narratives for a critical discussion on the problem. Several themes generated from the findings highlight the link between child labour and child susceptibility to sexual abuse. The findings also indicate the trauma of disbelief, stigma, culture of silence or lack of disclosure surrounding and reinforcing children's encounter with sexual exploitation. These narratives limit the nature of children's reintegration with families after disclosing sexual experiences and should shape the direction of interactions to address children's problems.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; non-disclosure of sexual abuse; child trafficking and child labour; Ubuntu and African centred perspective; reintegration, peer influence

There is limited research on what happens to children after they are removed from trafficking (Gozdziak, 2012) and other forms of abuse or exploitation. Attention should also focus

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[*]*The study was funded by The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Canada*

on children's experiences while in the care of anti-trafficking agencies (ATAs), the effect of this interaction on selected reintegration activities, which in most cases is sending children home, the essential point of departure into trafficking (Mbakogu, 2015) or exploitation. On returning home from trafficking, the interaction with children and their families is likely to present problems and complications that build from the nature of their experiences or the way the children return home, with minimal templates for understanding these family dynamics, making policy changes or designing programs to ease reintegration for children, their families, and communities after trafficking are challenging. This paper which is informed by available literature on reintegration programs for child soldiers (Fegley, 2008) and women trafficked for sexual exploitation, will address the relevance of African centred perspectives for understanding children's interaction with sexual abuse and the modalities surrounding disclosure, Nigeria's recently initiated sex offender's register, and the implications of the study's findings to the reintegration of child survivors of sexual abuse.

Research with women trafficked for sexual exploitation in Eastern Europe provides data on reintegration conflicts. The conflict could be stigma linked with the nature of their trafficking (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013), the attempt by survivors to mask the nature of their trafficking and deportation or shielding their stories from family members to avoid bringing shame to the family (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013; Surtees & Kerchove, 2012), changing family dynamics resulting from the end of remittances and the survivor's reversed financial position in the family (Plambech, 2014). Further, amplifying these family relationships, research with child soldiers show that children's resilience after trafficking is enhanced by reintegration rituals that involve family and community members in the healing process (Fegley, 2008) and the assurance of acceptance by their communities of return (Drury and Williams (2012). Narratives of women returning from sex work in Europe include engaging in sex in exchange for money to meet family expectations while waiting for their reintegration funds (Plambech, 2014) that suffer bureaucratic delays in transferring funds from Europe to Nigeria. When the funds are provided, the women cannot meet the local requirements for setting up and sustaining their businesses. The women often felt deceived by ATAs from the deporting and home countries (Plambech, 2014; Sørensen, 2010).

Reintegration of trafficked children

Essential to reintegration is awareness of the nature of the problem. How are children exploited, what is the nature of the exploitation, who is at risk, who are the exploiters, and how is the exploitation carried out? Research with children abducted as ex-slaves suggests that the children may require longer in-agency care and counselling prior to family reintegration (Fegley, 2008). In other words, agencies need rehabilitation processes that identify and accommodate survivors' immediate and future needs and survivor's agency (Ferraro, 1983; Jayasree, 2004). Moreover, rehabilitation services in several countries are more focused on adult or women survivors of sexual exploitation (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2013) than on children facing sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation before coming into anti-trafficking agencies.

Also important are the health implications of children's experiences on their adjustment after returning home to family members. In the past decade, growing research on the rehabilitation of child soldiers and ex-slaves shows that effectiveness is achieved within a

community module that argues that reintegrating children with their families reduces the risk of recruitment (after 'rescue' or demobilization). Further, scholarly and clinical research with this population indicates that survivors may be unfamiliar with their communities of origin, thus leading to their rejection when reintegration is attempted (Derluyn et al., 2004). Kiss et al.'s (2015) survey of children receiving post-trafficking services in the Greater Mekong Subregion show that children manifested high levels of depression and anxiety, leading the researchers to advocate for mental health screening ahead of social and family reintegration activities. Just as in the case of child soldiers where the UN's 2001 Appeal advocated for holistic child welfare approaches (Hansen et al., 2001) that cater to children's psychological, physical, social and economic reintegration, the same should apply to trafficking survivors.

Reintegration efforts are difficult to apply because they adopt foreign interventions to address local problems. Agencies also play to the needs and specifications of donor agencies (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012; Nwogu, 2014). When ATAs are not applying reintegration strategies that align with the cultural, social, religious and educational realities of child survivors they are dealing with (Cunneen, 2005; Gozdziak, 2012; Nwogu, 2014), it stands to reason, and children are confused about their intentions and the services they provide. Some of these realities are that some children are reluctant to relinquish their agency (Cree, Clapton & Smith, 2012) by remaining indefinitely in shelters when their family members depend on the income earned from their trafficking (Surtee, 2008; Gozdziak, 2012). Besides, children are suspicious of agency intentions when minimal information is provided about the length of their stay in shelters and the situation of their family members (Ferraro, 1983; Mbakogu, 2015).

Furthermore, reintegration processes for trafficked children focus on the child alone, not the family or community, particularly sending communities who send more children into trafficking. There is individualism to reintegration that masks the collective approach to family decisions that are made ahead of children's departure from home (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2012; Mbakogu, 2015). There is also the assumption that parents will care for children once they are returned home. The alternatives offered to poor parents in the absence of their child's work are unclear. Within the extended family system, children could also pick alternative homes to return to in the face of rejection by their parents. With limited funds for agency travel and coordination, ATAs cannot provide feedback to understand - how children fared after reintegration or monitor parents that were mandated to report on their children's wellbeing after reintegration (Fegley, 2008; Mbakogu, 2015). The rationale behind sending survivors home is built around the mystical concept of home as a place of safety and familiar space for children. However, home is the incomplete story of what it represents for returnee trafficked persons. Home could be the site of expectations, uncertainties, violence, re-victimization, re-trafficking, stigma and troubling memories of leaving and returning (Mbakogu, 2015). Critical understanding of home and what it implies for the reintegration of children experiencing sexual abuse, as the focus of this paper implies, is needed especially within the recently mandated Nigeria sexual offender's register.

Nigeria Sexual Offender Register - Relevance and applicability

Due to the nature of their crimes, sex offenders are considered more likely to be repeat offenders, especially in communities with restricted disclosure. This led governments to rise to critical approaches to curtail this crime, especially affecting children. One of such approaches is the

creation of the sex offenders' register (Farkas & Stichman, 2002). In several societies, sex offenders' registers are used to keep the public aware of the individuals within their vicinity that have been convicted of sex offences, enable them to avoid dangerously or repeat sex offenders, reduce the likelihood of sexual violence (Malesky & Keim, 2001) and discourage potential offenders (Farkas & Stichman, 2002). Studies suggest that sex offenders' registers are not utilized as widely as intended. A Michigan-based study found that only 51% of the participants had used the sex offenders register at least once (Kernsmith et al., 2009). At the same time, the New Jersey-based study presented more discouraging results. They discovered that only about half of the respondents knew about the register, and only 17% of the respondents had accessed the register, with the majority of those that had accessed the site doing so to prevent the occurrence of sexual violence (Boyle et al., 2013). Other studies have also investigated the efficacy of the sex offenders' registers in curbing sexual violence and reducing recidivism. In a study conducted by the US Department of Justice in South Carolina, it was discovered that while the sex offenders register had an effect in averting a significant number of first-time sexual violence cases, it had no effect in reducing the risk of sexual recidivism (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010).

The Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act of 2015 mandated the creation of a register containing the details of all sexual crimes in Nigeria. In response to this directive, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) launched Nigeria's first sexual offender register in November 2019. The register contains all reported, arraigned and convicted cases of sexual violence since 2015. The purpose of the register is to "name and shame" perpetrators and, as a result, reduce the incidence of sexual abuse in Nigeria. According to the NAPTIP website, registered users have free access to information on convicted cases (NSOD-NAPTIP, 2019). However, details of arraigned and reported cases are only available to persons after a fee of 500Naira has been paid via the website. The collected fees are put towards investigating reported cases. The creation of Nigeria's sex offenders register and access to information on sex offenders notwithstanding, little research has been done on the level of awareness of the register and its usefulness in reducing the spate of sexual violence in Nigeria. This leads the paper to explore how the sex offenders register fits in and/or incorporates African cultural approaches for reporting child sexual abuse.

African centered perspectives and child sexual abuse

A small number of approaches have been used to understand children's experiences of trafficking in Africa. Based on traditional African philosophy, the Afrocentric model emerged as a response to the heavy fixation by academia on Eurocentric values and/or standards as the only explanation for human behaviour (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2017), particularly the behaviour of non-European people. This paper promotes the inclusion of unique African perspectives for understanding human behaviour amongst and beyond people of African ancestry. The Afrocentric model rejects the notion of social science universalism because it is predicated on the belief that people of African Descent have a peculiar history and culture that has shaped their worldview and behaviour (Schiele, 1996).

A key element of the African-centered framework is the concept of 'Ubuntu' which refers to "humanness" (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2017). The concept of Ubuntu has received substantial attention in academic discourse in recent times (Kruidenier, 2015) as African scholars are

beginning to push for a more African centred approach to the study of social work and the decolonization of social work practice, particularly in Africa (Atsheni, 2018 as cited in, Van Breda, 2019). Ubuntu is centred on the IsiZulu maxim 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabanthu,' which means that a person is a person through other persons' (Kruidenier, 2015). This translates from African philosophy that views people not as individuals but as part of a whole (Letseka, 2011). It places heavy emphasis on the interconnectedness of people within a community (Manyonganise, 2015) rather than individualistic tendencies that moderate Eurocentric approaches and practices for addressing the needs of persons of African Descent. Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) emphasize that the focus of Ubuntu is on cooperation and collaboration, as the prevalent belief within the community is that the wellbeing of all is intertwined. Ubuntu is a value-driven philosophy that encourages community members' kindness, generosity, and hospitality (Makgoro, 1998). At its core is the belief that the pain of one is the pain of all, and therefore everyone must work together and look out for one another (Kruidenier,2015)

In as much as the Zulu word, "Ubuntu" is popularly used to refer to this concept of humanness and communal responsibility, other words are used to express the same concept in other African countries (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). The spirit of Ubuntu has different dimensions, from the values concerning spirituality (Műller & Deventer, 1998) to values relating to human dignity (Kruidenier, 2015). Within this paper, we will focus on the theory of Ubuntu from the angle of communal living and its effect on the protection and wellbeing of underage children. The African saying: "It takes a village to raise a child" and "your neighbour's child is your own" are central to Ubuntu. Despite the positive intentions behind this belief, the high levels of involvement of trusted adults in a child's life have been linked to the high incidence of child sexual abuse in Africa.

Furthermore, Ubuntu has been accused of being sexist and oppressive towards women, typically viewed as subordinate to men in most African societies. Moreover, women are often silenced and left out of critical decision-making processes (Manyonganise, 2015). A Shona proverb which means that "the secrets of the home need to remain untold," was popularized to silence women victims of domestic violence in the community (Manyonganise, 2015). Expectedly, a "domestic violence act" enacted in Zimbabwe in 2007 received disapproval by the local people who thought it granted women the impetus to speak out about crimes committed within the home that would have been unpunished (Manyonganise, 2015) if settled communally. The communities that practice Ubuntu are known to shame female survivors who speak out about abuse, and with mounting community pressure, women are forced to withdraw their cases, which encourages the culture of abuse within these communities. This illustrates the imperfections of the Ubuntu philosophy as it exploits binding and supportive African cultural processes to embolden the immorality of men within the community while promoting the culture of silence among women victims.

There is currently limited research on the long-term effect of children's experiences with sexual abuse and the nature of reintegration processes (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2007; Gozdziak, 2012) for effective interaction with family and community and their future aspirations. The sexual abuse of vulnerable children within Africa must be examined through the Afrocentric lens as the peculiarities of the African culture, manifested in Ubuntu, significantly affect the incidence and

disclosure rates of child sexual abuse in Nigeria and Africa. The following research questions direct this paper:

1. How do children express their experiences with sexual abuse or exploitation?

a. To what extent do children's relationship with the perpetrator determine disclosure of sexual abuse?

2. To what extent did children's interaction with the anti-trafficking agency and its services support children's resettlement in their communities?

a. Are children provided with clearly stated options (such as formal education, skill acquisition, job options) to return home on removal from trafficking?

With attention to the research questions, the paper will present the methodology and implications of the study's findings to effectively reintegrate child survivors of sexual abuse and social work practice with this population.

Method

Child sexual abuse or exploitation is a social issue that could benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the problem. Children facing sexual abuse have diverse experiences and triggers of the problem. It is essential to speak to affected children to understand the experiences, factors reinforcing their abuse and the nature of resources available and desired for effective reintegration or adjustment. The ongoing 24-month qualitative research relied on NAPTIP and anti-trafficking agencies across selected West African countries (Ghana, Togo and Benin) for access to trafficking survivors (in their shelter or those who have exited the shelter) and their families. The study adopts multiple qualitative tools (individual and group interviews and arts-based methodologies) to gather information from agency personnel, survivors of trafficking, and family members. Interview sessions with child survivors integrated open-ended questions and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. Interview sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and focused on: their experiences of departures from home, anti-trafficking agencies and reintegration processes.

Ethics approval was obtained from a University's Ethics Review Board before conducting the research. To ensure that participants were safeguarded throughout the study, pictorial images of subjects were disallowed. This also included ethical research and linking participants to available local supports when necessary. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw their consent to participate at any point during the research process. Consent forms were provided to adult participants and assent forms to children. These forms were signed ahead of the research interaction. To protect participant confidentiality, numbers or aliases were assigned to all child and adult participants in the study.

Further, the principal researcher integrated African-centered perspectives rooted in storytelling traditions to understand the experiences of participating children. Participant interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed for data analysis by focusing on the larger implication of stories related to theories and real-life situations. These are three main themes: child labour and child sexual abuse, disclosures and child sexual abuse, and reintegration after child sexual abuse - emerging from this analysis guide discussions on the study's findings.

Results and Discussions

Child abuse is rife across Africa, classifying it as a public health epidemic. That notwithstanding, academic research around child trafficking, child labour and the detrimental

effects of harmful cultural practices in African is still in its early stages. (Badoe, 2017). In Nigeria, for instance, while Child sexual abuse is widespread, cases are largely underreported (Olusegun & Idowu, 2016).

Child labour as the new entry into child sexual abuse

It is estimated that 15million children are working largely in the informal and semi-formal sectors in Nigeria (F.O.S., 2003). Rising levels of poverty in Nigeria also increasingly prompt children to work to supplement household income (Mbakogu, 2004; 2015), this is even more popular in polygamous families where parents produce more children than they can cater for (Audu et al. 2008; Busari, 2016; Johnson et al., 2019; Ouédraogo, 2017) and women are saddled with the care of their offspring.

Peer influence

Poverty has also been stated as the major catalyst for child trafficking within the continent, and young girls are typically trafficked into domestic service, prostitution and street hawking within and outside the country (ODI, 2012; Olusegun & Idowu, 2016; Mbakogu, 2004, 2015). 15-year-old Precious lived with her mother prior to coming to the NAPTIP shelter. Her father passed away when she was four years old, and her mother, who recently got a job as a cleaner after her little business went under, has several children from other men. Precious has lived with three Igbo and Yoruba heritage people in Aba and Abuja, Nigeria, serving as a house help without attending school. After returning home to live with her mother, she started school with several disruptions due to late school fees. She assisted her mother by hawking sachet water to augment family income:

…those my friends they told me that there is a man they used to meet that they used to sleep with him, and the man will give them money. I used to shout, and I told them that my mum said if I move near any man, I am going to get pregnant. So is this what you people have been doing since and you will bring big big money, sometimes they will bring 2,000 Naira and hide the rest, and my mum will think I am not selling anything… she will be shouting at me. They now told me that if I should do this work that it is very nice, I should just do it. That the man used to sleep with children and give them money.

Several studies have identified an increase in vulnerability to sexual abuse amongst child workers (Busari, 2016) and pointed out that the lower the social class of the hawker, the higher the risk of abuse (Johnson et al., 2019; Busari, 2016). The role of peers as recruiters of their friends and family members for exploitative work, especially commercial sex trafficking, is underexplored (Mbakogu, 2015).

From hawking to sexual exploitation

Precious was a victim of peer pressure, which led her to sleep with an older man (known to her friends) who had a stall in the market. The older man who has a habit of sleeping with children knows Precious's mother, as she buys goods from his shop. He would compensate the child victims with money to take home to the parents, pretending to have sold all the goods they set to hawk for the day. Precious, who had watched sadly as her friends counted money earned after each day of hawking while she took nothing home to her mother, finally succumbed to their pressure. She pretended that she was going to sell packs of sachet water at a Christian vigil event:

…it is because my mummy is not doing job, and sometimes … they even chase us out of

school because of school fees. So, I…said, okay I will go and sleep with the man, let the man sleep with me and when the man gives me the money I will go and bring it to my mother. They now went to tell the man that they have …one girl. When the man saw me, he said, is this not mama ---- daughter…? That he used to see me, but he did not recognize me…I was afraid, but when I went to meet the man that night, the man slept with me. When the man slept with me, he gave me 3000Naira.

It is uncertain how this practice began, became normalized and went unnoticed by the perpetrator's neighbours in the market where the transaction was negotiated and at home where the children were violated. That notwithstanding, several West African studies indicate street hawking as a common gateway for child sexual abuse. Ouédraogo et al.'s (2017) study that included females aged 13-24 who hawked around two locations in Burkina Faso reports that half of the respondents were sexually harassed while hawking. Other studies in Nigeria reported age discrepancies for alleged abuse of child hawkers, with Audu et al.'s (2008) study in Maiduguri, Nigeria showing that girl hawkers below the age of 12 were more likely to be sexually abused. Relatedly, Amole et al. (2021) reported that though female hawkers aged 15-19 in Kano, Nigeria were at greater risk of experiencing abuse, they found that respondents with secondary school level education were 62% less likely to be abused because education may equip them with skill sets that reduce their vulnerability to abuse. The amount of time the respondents spent hawking appears was also moderated by regular school attendance (Amole et al., 2021), which will not apply to Precious, who though in secondary school, has low levels of school attendance due to inability to pay her school fees on time. It is also important to understand the role of peer pressure in pushing children toward sexual abuse and trafficking (Mbakogu, 2015).

Child sexual abuse – the prioritization of disclosures, voices, belief and stigma

There is also the recurring trend of child sexual abuse within the home, perpetrated by close relatives, including parents. The news media has several reports of child victims of incest and the violence they experienced and endured (AFP, 2020; Agbese, 2020; Olatunji, 2019; Usman, 2018). News reporting and research with affected children also identify the silence of disclosure, which cultural practices of respect for parents could moderate, regardless of abuse and the shame of community stigma when stories are shared (Hassan & Agbo, 2019; Mbakogu, 2015; Ogunjimi et al., 2020; Uchechukwu, 2018).

Children are not heard or believed

Beauty is a 15-year-old girl from the Eastern part of Nigeria who initially lived with her father, an educated professional, mother, and four siblings. She complained of sexual violation by her father, who began when she was about three years old:

…when I was growing up, there was this kind of special fatherly love for me. I thought it would continue like that, not knowing things would change. So, at the age of 3, my dad was fingering me until I grew up. When I was 13, it was the first time he had sex with me. It is not that I could not tell my mum, but I did not have the boldness, and she was somebody that…my dad always beats her, maltreats her. She was now like a slave in her own house…I was like, if I tell my mummy, she will not do anything after all. So, there was no need for me to tell her. I kept on living in pain, sorrow and bitterness, hoping that one day I will grow up and have the boldness or God will send someone to speak up for me…at times I will tell my friends in school they will be

like… 'because when you see me outside if I tell you that this is what I am going through, you will not believe. They were like I am lying, I told my teachers in school, my friends.

The child's narrative presents multiple factors preventing disclosure. These include a lack of boldness as an African child living with her parents and her mother, a victim of domestic violence, had minimal authority in the household. In essence, the child felt that since the mother could not fight for herself, she could not possibly listen and achieve justice for another. Though Beauty was brave enough to disclose to her teachers and friends, their disbelief meant that action was not taken. Beauty's experiences are reflected in a study by David et al. (2017) in South Western Nigeria revealed that only 34.4% of adolescents who had been victims of abuse disclosed the abuse. Several reasons were cited for non-disclosure: shame (40.4%), expected lack of action after disclosure (31.6%), fear of their abusers (10.5%) and disbelief after disclosure (17.5%). As further indication that the voices and experiences of victims of sexual abuse are not prioritized, the same study found that only 43.8% of children who disclosed were taken to the hospital, no action was taken in 31% of the cases while others were either scolded or disbelieved. Additionally, studies have found that non-disclosure of sexual abuse is intensified in scenarios where the perpetrator is known to the child victim and/or her parents (Job, 2019); and are more likely to be boyfriends (31.2%), neighbours (16.1%), relatives (7.5%) and strangers (7.5%) (David et al., 2017). Children are also unlikely to disclose in settings and dynamics that are likely to shut them down to share imaginary stories or make unfounded accusations about older persons in society.

Culture and disclosure

Several studies have attempted to understand the reasons for low disclosure rates in African communities (David et al., 2017; Olusegun & Idowu, 2016). There is an increased link to cultural practices and modalities of respect that unintentionally promote disclosure of child sexual abuse and allow perpetrators to escape legal action (Olusegun & Idowu, 2016). Beauty's narrative points to the fact that sexual abuse of female children could be intensified with the absence of a mother or mother-figure who is knowledgeable, willing to listen and present in the home.

...last year…my father sent my mother out of the house; they had a misunderstanding. My mother complained: "I am a housewife for 19 years, open a business for me." My dad felt that when he opens a business for her, then she will start having money, she will no longer have respect for him. While my mum was not that kind of person… He sent my mum out. That was when he now had more opportunity to do whatever he wanted to me. My dad will go out and carry all these sex workers because there were many hotels around us where we were staying. He will carry prostitutes; he will still come back; he will still have sex with me. I will tell my friend to pray for me to leave the house.

The culture of non-disclosure often diverts attention from the health needs of violated children. This includes the presence of a mother figure, who grooms the girl-child to understand their bodies and report unsanctioned violations to it by older persons. If such education is ignored, left too late or deemed unimportant, then children are unlikely to understand the worth of their bodies and report violations to it. A study seeking the perception of health care professionals on factors that encourage child sexual abuse found that the majority of the participants attributed this to – perpetrator's ability to take advantage of a child's innocence and ignorance of sexual matters and children's high level of trust for familiar adults (Ogunjimi et al., 2020). Their findings stressed

that the African culture of silence concerning sex, patriarchy, and the fixation on respect makes it difficult for children to reject the advances of older men who solicit sexual favours. The respondents also expressed concerns that people are reluctant to report cases of sexual abuse when they imagine the likely family feud when the abuser is a close relative and social stigma associated with the abuse (Ogunjimi et al., 2020).

With a focus on a study with the Bapedi tribe, South Africa, fear of the abuser, the practice of Ubuntu, poor socioeconomic class of the family, fear of tarnishing the reputation of the family and cultural values were highlighted as the major reasons for non-disclosure (Frank, 2019). This can be related to Beauty's narratives of joy on seeing her mother at the NAPTIP office after she departed from home. However, that joy turned to surprise and sadness with the lack of support from her mother on finally learning about her violation:

She (her counsellor) told me that they arrested my father, and he is denying [the abuse]. When I saw my mother in the head office. I was like, "is this, my mum?" The way she left the house that is not how she is looking. She was looking lean like somebody that is suffering, I hugged her. I was surprised because instead of her to stand for me, she was now asking why I went to report. She started insulting me, calling me ogbanje [Igbo word for a mischievous evil child who torments their parents by coming and going, never living beyond puberty]

Beauty's mother was more interested in protecting their joint abuser. Several studies have shown that the practice of Ubuntu prevented victims and their families from reporting abuse for fear that the abuser will be subjected to punishment by law enforcement. They preferred to keep the abuse a secret and settle everything within the family unit. Situations become more complicated within cultural contexts, as it is reported that most perpetrators are family members, such as fathers of the victims, which makes their mothers reluctant to come up in support of their children because the fathers are the sole breadwinners (Frank, 2019), much like Beauty's case. These mothers failed to disclose in some instances because they did not want their children to carry the lifelong label of sexual abuse and be vulnerable to further abuse within the community (Frank, 2019). Besides, children within the tribe were known to withhold information about abuse to avoid tarnishing their relationship with their perpetrators.

These findings are similar to those from a joint study by the Government of Ghana and UNICEF (2016). They discovered that in Ghana, as in other African countries, various communities uphold the belief that "It takes a community to raise a child." This belief is rooted in Africans' connection to their family and clan. Based on this connection, members of these Ghanaian communities would handle child abuse cases within the clan without consulting the relevant authorities, which eventually resulted in mishandling sensitive cases that failed to adopt prevalent child rights standards (Government of Ghana & UNICEF, 2016).

Like several sexually abused children, Precious and Beauty were threatened by family members, including the perpetrator:

…he tells me he will butcher me and flush me, and nobody will hear about it.

These words expressed by her abusive parent caused Beauty, as with other child victims, to feel defenseless and neglected. In Precious's case, her mother was more explicit in expressing the inferiority of her abuse to the reputation of the family:

My mother told me to shut up that it is better for me to die than for me to bring shame

inside her house.

Coupled with the West African studies, studies have been conducted in Nigeria to get to the root of the low level of disclosure in the country. Olusegun & Idowu (2016) attributed the low disclosure rates to prevalent cultural practices that justify and normalize some forms of abuse. Other reasons for non-disclosure, according to the authors, include the victim's fear of their guardian's response, the threat of harm from the perpetrator, the legal cost of pursuing the case in court and some children's inability to understand that they have been abused (Olusegun & Idowu, 2016).

Beauty and Precious's cases, supported by these studies, reveal a potential flaw in protective cultural practices that may lead people to uphold a deep-rooted sense of loyalty to one another even in the face of child sexual abuse.

Reintegrating child survivors of sexual abuse

Several researchers assert that the high prevalence of child sexual abuse is a direct consequence of the inadequate implementation of laws related to abuse in Nigeria (which ultimately impact reintegration) rather than the absence of laws (David et al., 2017; Obagboye, 2020; Olusegun & Idowu, 2016).

Shaky support from law enforcement

Regardless of increased media reporting on cases of child sexual abuse, it appears that law enforcement agents are not sensitized to handling and providing support to child survivors. Children's narratives indicate that they are revictimized by the police and, as Beauty indicated, required to contribute money toward opening her case file.

They told me that I should come to the police station around three…They asked me questions, they asked me to write a statement, I wrote. But what surprised me was that these women I took like mothers after reading my statement, hearing from me, and my father started telling me that I am a liar. They asked why I could not speak since I was small. So, she was now saying that I enjoyed it finish. Maybe it is now that I am no longer enjoying it that I decided to speak out. I wanted to run mad. People were holding me. Some asked me, "are you sure this is your father?" I said, "yes." My father was busy there saying… I now told them that at times my father…will tell me he wants to check me, then from checking me, he will start doing another thing. When they asked him, he told the policeman that I just asked her to pull her clothes and just wanted to check her…I told them that since they do not want to believe me, I have my teachers in school, and I have my friends and my diary. It was Friday and almost closing time for school. They said, okay, I should go and bring those things I mentioned, and when I am coming, I should bring money to open a file and 1000Naira for them to take me to the hospital.

Beauty's account is comparable to a news report of a 13-year-old girl kidnapped and raped by a 27-year-old man while on an errand for her parents (Ajumobi, 2020). The perpetrator's family members delayed the victim at the police station for almost 24 hours. The child victim was only released from the police station and offered medical support after the intervention of the Women Empowerment and Legal Aids (WELA) NGO The way the case was handled with minimal urgency from law enforcement is a significant cause for concern.

Also, due to the peculiarities of the African culture, some parents may be reluctant to seek legal action against the perpetrators because of the negative consequences doled out to victims of

abuse. Rather, like in the case of Precious, some parents may try to take laws into their hands by forcing their children to drink concoctions to get rid of unwanted pregnancy, shame and community stigma associated with sexual abuse than invest in expensive and extended legal activities/battles.

I was taking all those things… I would have died that time because the water was flowing from my body. She now said that if the thing wanted to kill the baby inside my stomach, that water would be flowing out of my body, and blood would be flowing out, and the thing would make me weak. So, I was walking bent like an older woman. So early in the morning, she will check my stomach that the baby is not breathing again, that the baby has died. So, one Yoruba woman used to bring all those concoctions; if not for God, I would have died. I now went to that my aunties house and told her that "see what is happening. Oh, that I cannot take it."

It is important that interventions for addressing and reintegrating child survivors of sexual abuse address the cultural and religious realities that moderate the lives of affected children and their families. Frustrated parents may also engage in reckless activities that they would regret in future, such as starving their pregnant children.

Sometimes she will cook food and say that I should not eat, so I will now stay hungry from morning to night.

Ige and Fawole (2011) carried out a study in a slum community in Ibadan, Nigeria, to understand the perceptions of parents and guardians of children below the age of 15 on child sexual abuse. They found that 84% of participants acknowledged the severity of child sexual abuse. However, only a small percentage (34.6%) of participants considered that there could be serious health implications for victims of abuse if penetrative sexual intercourse did not occur. This supports the limited knowledge caregivers of vulnerable children have of the potential negative health implications of the forms of sexual abuse that do not involve penetrative sexual intercourse. Parents in this study also showed significant gaps in knowledge of the more subtle behavioural traits exhibited by children that are victims of abuse. The research showed that behavioural changes are not regarded by most as potentially indicative of child sexual abuse. The researchers suggested that the inability of guardians to detect abuse may hinder their ability to protect their children from further abuse.

They now said that they were going to pay my antenatal bill. They are going to train me in school. They are going to pay my hospital bill. They are the ones that pay my antenatal money… operation everything… They are the ones that paid for everything. So, after everything they said, I am going to court.

Precious finally had her baby at the age of 15, with the support of an NGO that promised to support her education. Her mother also agreed to take care of the baby while Precious returned to school. NAPTIP also facilitated beauty's education because the family dynamics and outlook of her mother and relatives who supported the perpetrator were obvious signs that home was not a safe place of return for the child. It is emphasized that educating parents on the dangers of hawking and building good communication between parents and children will reduce the incidence of abuse among female hawkers (Amole et al., 2021). Likewise, all stakeholders, including religious and traditional leaders, should engage in outreach programs to educate parents on the importance of reporting abuse because not doing so may increase its incidence (David et al.,

2017).

Relevance to social work practice and conclusion

For social workers to effectively protect vulnerable African children, they must consider the prevailing socio-cultural factors that facilitate child sexual abuse within specific regions. This includes awareness of the societal factors, victim relationships or experiences and internal conflicts that hinder children from disclosing to enable them effectively assess and assist child victims of abuse (Lovett, 2004). Communal cultural practices that promote the culture of silence when associated with handling or identifying perpetrators of exploitative sex ultimately encourage victim-blaming and patriarchy, which have been highlighted as significant hindrances to victim disclosure.

For child sexual abuse to be prevented, both children and their parents need to be adequately educated. Parents specifically need to be educated on detecting abuse and/or responding to child disclosed abuse in a supportive manner (Lovett, 2004). Social workers need to educate parents and/or caregivers on the need to prioritize the voices of child survivors by ensuring that abuse, when they occur and are disclosed to them, are reported to law enforcement or child protection. To address cultural and legal silencing or mishandling of child sexual abuse matters, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015, also known as the VAPP (earlier mentioned), mandated that a record of sex offenders should be kept. While it is commendable that NAPTIP has created the register, the efficacy and usefulness of the register are still under question. Therefore, public education on the existence and importance of the sex offender's registry is crucial to increase awareness and reduce the rate of sexual violence (Boyle et al., 2013). Social workers could lead these awareness drives in their countries or regions of practice. It is essential to have a functional system for collecting and sharing information amongst agencies involved in child protection (Badoe, 2017) and welfare. These agencies and/or stakeholders will augment government drives towards effective reintegration of children. Additionally, stakeholders should be consciously engaged in listening to and validating children's stories and offering support for children within protective, nurturing and collective African cultural practices, rather than flipping culture as a means to undermine the voice and wellbeing of defenceless children.

Finally, it is not enough to ratify child protection laws. Nigeria and other African countries should be held accountable for implementing these laws that enhance the wellbeing of children. Therefore, social workers at the macro level need to advocate for strict implementation of existing laws meant to protect children from abuse, as this is crucial for preventing child sexual abuse (Muridzo & Chikadzi, 2020).

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