

## **FORENSIC SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES REGARDING THE NON-DISCLOSURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE DURING FORENSIC ASSESSMENTS WITH BLACK MALE CHILD VICTIMS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Several studies describe reasons why children are reluctant to disclose sexual abuse. However, there is an incompleteness in understanding how black male child victims do not easily disclose their sexual abuse experiences. This study aimed to describe the experiences of forensic social workers regarding the non-disclosure of sexual abuse during forensic assessments with black male child victims. The ecosystems theory was used to zoom into systems that black male children in South Africa find themselves in which prevent them from disclosing their sexual abuse experiences. A qualitative approach with a descriptive design using a stratified random, purposive and convenient sampling techniques were employed to select fourteen forensic social workers who participated in this study. Semi-structured individual interviews with open ended questions were used to collect data which was analyzed thematically through the help of NVivo 12 Pro software. Findings revealed fear of the consequences to self and patriarchal values as having an influence for the non-disclosure of child sexual abuse amongst black male child victims during forensic assessments. Socio-cultural systems which black male child victims find themselves in were also found to have a very strong influence in their reluctance to disclose sexual abuse. It is therefore imperative that forensic social workers and other experts consider strategies useful to promote the disclosure of child sexual abuse which should focus on reducing fear of consequences of disclosing and rethinking cultural values.

**Keywords:** African Culture, Black Male Child Victim, Child Sexual Abuse, Disclosure, Forensic Assessment

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sexual abuse amongst children is of a serious considerable magnitude worldwide. It affects children of all ages, genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic groups and is associated with adverse physical and psychological health, as well as economic effects throughout life (Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010; Ramphabana, Rapholo & Makhubele, 2019). South Africa has been experiencing a number of child sexual abuse incidents in the past years which were historically not reported. This has left children vulnerable to sexual abuse for many years. Research on child sexual abuse has primarily curtailed from high income settings with limited work from low to middle income countries, like South Africa (World Health Organisation, 2010). While the research base in the field of child sexual abuse is insufficient in South Africa, Mathews et al. (2012) state that social contexts in Africa create conditions for child sexual abuse to be perpetuated. Mathews et al. (2012) denote that societal and cultural norms on the social position of children, childrearing practices, and the breakdown of immediate and

extended family systems, child-headed households and orphaned children render children vulnerable to child sexual abuse.

From their ethnographic study in South Africa and Namibia, Jewkes, Penn-Kekana and Rose-Junius (2005) established that a missing aspect in child sexual abuse discourse is the gendered nature of the act. The reality is that child sexual abuse affect both girls and boys, however, due to the gendered position in the South African society, girls are more likely to disclose sexual abuse. Very little is known about the sexual abuse of boys. Although several studies show that child sexual abuse is mostly common amongst female child victims (Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Landers, 2013; Rapholo & Makhubele, 2019; Ramphabana et al., 2019), this does not mean that child sexual abuse does not occur amongst male children. Priebe and Svedin (2008) and Landers (2013)'s studies show that the disclosure of child sexual abuse is most likely to happen amongst female children as opposed to male children due to various reasons. For example, in most African cultures male children are expected to conduct themselves in ways consistence with the principle of masculine while female children are expected to remain feminine. Under such traditional belief systems, it is likely that the disclosure of child sexual abuse will be determined by social and gender expectations (Ramphabana et al., 2019). This study argues that several studies undertaken in child sexual abuse allegations describe reasons why children are reluctant to disclose sexual abuse, however, there is an incompleteness in understanding robustly how male child victims, particularly black children, do not easily disclose their sexual abuse experiences. Given that male children experience sexual abuse and that they are less likely to disclose, the researcher developed an interest to scientifically investigate the experiences of forensic social workers regarding the non-disclosure of sexual abuse during forensic assessments with black male child victims within the black South African socio-cultural context. This study was conducted in reference to value systems, beliefs, norms and customs. The aim of this study was to describe the experiences of forensic social workers regarding the non-disclosure of sexual abuse during forensic assessments with black male child victims in South Africa.

## **THE PREVALENCE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH AFRICA**

In South Africa, child sexual abuse is quite a disturbing discourse that really needs a vigorous scientific research, which in particular should zoom into how socio-cultural practices influence its disclosure. Socio-cultural beliefs and practices often contribute to reasons why children do not easily disclose sexual abuse. Several studies show that dominant patriarchal constructions in South Africa legitimate male control over children and women (Townsend & Dawes 2004; Seedat, Van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla & Ratele, 2009; Mathews et al., 2012). Such practices promote ideas of male sexual entitlement. Jewkes et al. (2005) postulate that in some instances, sexual abuse is used as a means to punish a mother or the girl-child, with rape used as a display of control. In most cultural backgrounds, children are socialized to obey and respect their elders. In most of such value systems harsh methods of discipline are still used to enforce parental control (Guma & Henda, 2004). Sexual violence occur without any resistance from children as a result of this unquestionable authority of adults (Townsend & Dawes, 2004). In the same breath to this disturbing discourse of child sexual abuse by the authoritative figures, sexual abuse by teachers was also found in most South African schools (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Brookes & Higson-Smith, 2004; Abrahams, Jewkes, Laubscher & Hoffman, 2006). Teachers, in their position of authority within the school setting, also hold significant power over school children, and end up sexually abusing them. Therefore, these unequal power

relations within the South African communities, afford men the space to sexually abuse children. Previous studies found that perpetrators of child sexual abuse are predominantly male adults and youths who children know, particularly, relatives and acquaintances (Makoae, Warri, Bower, Ward, Loffel & Dawes, 2009; Mathews et al., 2012).

The need to prevent and combat crimes against children in South Africa was identified in 1986 wherein a unit within the South African Police Service was established (Pienaar, 2000). By then, there were no specific legal frameworks to mitigate child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is a universal phenomenon that occurs across cultures and socio-economic groupings (Lalor, 2004). In order to reduce its occurrence, it is therefore imperative to understand the social context that increases children's vulnerability and that provides the environment for such acts to occur. The year 1994 with its political transition from apartheid to a democratic state brought new efforts to address child sexual abuse (Mathews et al., 2012; Arts, Burton, Ward, Leoschurt, Phyfer & Kassanje, 2016). The government of South Africa has secured the protection of children, with the support and technical input of child protection advocacy specialists within the non-governmental sector. The author state that critical reforms included the overhaul of child protection and sexual offences legislation and the development of criminal justice, health and social development policies and programmes that promote and support relevant interventions, investigations and service provision for children in need of care and protection (Rapholo, 2018). These reforms brought new legal definitions of what constitutes child sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment and concomitant laws, regulations and protocols for addressing these abuses. It was then that various laws in South Africa such as Domestic Violence Act No 116 of 1998, the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act No 32 of 2007 and the Children's Act No 38 of 2005, as well as other policies and protocols, such as the Service Charter for Victims of Crime in SA (2004), were not only unambiguously aimed to define the nature of offences that have been criminalized, but also provided a range of devices to report and manage abuse of and maltreatment against children through positive legal duties prescribed within the substantive law and comprehensive regulations (Arts et al., 2016). The Sexual Offences Act no 32 of 2007 broadens the definition of rape, therefore recognizing the rape of boys (anal sex) and acknowledging a wide range of non-penetrative acts as sexual assault. These laws and regulations support preventative measures to address child abuse and maltreatment in South Africa. According to Jewkes et al. (2005) and Richter and Dawes (2008), the responsiveness of the social welfare sector regarding the protection of vulnerable children and the criminal justice system's involvement in punishing perpetrators are important features of societal responses to child sexual abuse, however, the other study in Gauteng province of South Africa found that the prosecution drops 45.5% of cases of young girls (Vetten, Jewkes, Fuller, Christofides, Loots & Dunseith, 2008).

The Children's Amendment Act No 41 of 2007 provides the framework for psychological, rehabilitative and therapeutic services for abused children, but key to the effectiveness of this legislation is the appropriate resources for the act to be fully implemented (Proudlock & Jamieson, 2008). Due to the nature of child sexual abuse in South Africa, child protection requires an integrated collaborative response from social service officials, the police, the courts, medico-legal services, health care services and education. All these sectors are important in deterring and managing child sexual abuse with the aim of effectively protecting the child.

Child protection services in the past were primarily provided by the non-government sector until in 1986 when South African Police Service was introduced. By then, there were

large gaps in services, especially in rural areas with shortages of skilled staff and resources (Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 2005). Services were focused on statutory processes, with alternative care used as a device to ensure children's safety (Loffel, 2004). At the international level, a proposal was made to effectively address child sexual abuse wherein it had to be managed in specialized units functioning with a multidisciplinary team (Killian & Brakarsh, 2004; Maniglio, 2009).

The dilemma is that South Africa is faced with a huge challenge for the provision of effective services within a large diverse population (Higson-Smith, Lamprecht & Jacklin, 2004). Specialized services on child protection in South Africa are, however, still inadequate, (Higson-Smith et al., 2004). However, forensic social work has currently been recognised by the South African Council for Social Service Professions as a specialised field yet with very limited staff to effectively address the disclosure child sexual abuse across the country. So far, only few accredited institution of higher learning in South Africa offer a masters programme on forensic practice in child sexual abuse allegations (Rapholo & Makhubele, 2019).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In order to pursue the aim of this study, the ecosystems theory, which is commonly used in social work, was employed. The profession of social work acknowledges an interaction between individuals, families, groups and communities with their environments. The perception of behind the ecosystems theory is that individuals do not function in isolation, but are influenced by the environments in which they live in and interact with. In the context of this study, children are believed to have an interaction with their social environment. Gitterman (2009) asserts that the social environment include cultural aspects which involve values, norms, beliefs, that shape an individual's behaviour and how they view the world. The ecosystems theory focuses on how people interrelate with their environment (Colton, Sanders & Williams 2001; Weyers 2011). This theory was useful and appropriate in this study to expound the relationship between black children in South Africa and the socio-cultural systems with which they interact. For instance, it was found that in certain cultures, children are socialised by their elders to conform to family and societal values, rules, norms and standards, compelling sexually abused children to (unintentionally) keep sexual abuse secret. This validated what Fontes and Plummer (2010) have found at the international level that cultural norms have an influence on the possibility of children to disclose sexual abuse and the even when it has been noticed, families of the abused children do not report it to legal authorities. It is therefore imperative that forensic social workers consider different levels in the ecological system such as culture, family, ethnicity, and social systems like neighbourhood and schools when investigation possible sexual abuse. Several studies postulates that culture sets guidelines on how one belonging to a particular group should conduct his or her behaviour (Guma & Henda, 2004; Collin-Vézina Sablonni, Palmer & Milne, 2015).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used a qualitative research approach with a descriptive design. These methods were followed with an attempt to gain an in-depth insight and understanding of factors encumbering the disclosure of child sexual abuse amongst black male children in South Africa. Descriptive designs are used when little is known about a research topic (Botma, Greeff, Mulaudzi &

Wright, 2010). In the context of this study, the experiences of forensic social workers regarding the non-disclosure of sexual abuse during forensic assessments with black male child victims in South Africa are described. These forensic social workers who participated in this study are employed by the SAPS. In order to select them, sampling methods were triangulated, i.e. stratified random sampling, purposive sampling and convenient sampling techniques. Sampling means taking part of a lesser number of units of a particular population to represent such population (Thomas & Smith, 2003; De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont 2011; De Poy & Gilson 2008). Stratified random sampling was used to purposefully select forensic social workers who were available or more convenient for this study. A list of forensic social workers from the SAPS National Office was accessed wherein each province was considered as the strata. Since purposive sampling was employed, contingent on the availability of forensic social workers, one to two forensic social workers per strata (Province) were drawn as they are limited and unequally distributed in the country. The selection ended when data saturation was reached at the fourteenth participant. In terms of the criteria used to select the participants, the researcher considered training and experience of forensic social workers in the assessment of sexually abused children. Forensic social workers who have a specialized training and at least five years of practical experience of conducting forensic assessments were included in this study.

Secondary data (literature) and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used collect data in this study. Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013) state that secondary data involves the search and study of recent writings on a particular social problem or subject under investigation. Semi-structure face to face interviews were guided by the interview schedule (Babbie & Mouton 2001; Greeff, 2011) with open ended questions. These interviews were aimed at understanding forensic social workers' experiences of factors encumbering the disclosure of child sexual abuse amongst black male child victims in South African. An audiotape recording device was used to record the interviews with the consent of the forensic social workers. This helped immensely during data transcription leading to data analysis. Field notes after each interview with the forensic social workers were also written.

Data was analysed thematically with the assistance of the Nvivo software. Monette, Sullivan, and de Jong (2008) and De Vos et al. (2011) state that data analysis involves a process in which researcher bring order and structure from the raw data so as to make a meaning from it. After data collection, the researcher categorised and interpreted the qualitative data, so that it could be organised and presented in a manner that would answer the research questions and objectives of this study.

## **Ethical Issues**

Studies should generally be conducted ethically (Strydom, 2011). Research ethics includes a set of moral principles and rules guiding the researcher during the research process (Gray, 2009; Strydom, 2011). Ethical clearance was obtained from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee of the University of Limpopo, and permission was obtained from the South African Police Service (SAPS), in order to conduct this study. The participants were requested to sign consent forms which outlined the aim of the study. They were also assured that their names will be kept anonymous and that the data they give will be handled and stored to maintain confidentiality. They gave written consent for their agreement to participate in the study. Participation in this study was voluntary and the participants were informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Demographical Details of Participants**

Fourteen forensic social workers who have five years and beyond experience of conducting forensic assessments during child sexual abuse allegations participated in this study. Thirteen of these forensic social workers were females and one was a male. Their age group ranged from thirty one to sixty years. The majority of them were black followed by mixed race and white. All nine provinces [**Limpopo (1), Mpumalanga (2), North West (2), Gauteng (2), KwaZulu Natal (2), Eastern Cape (1), Northern Cape (1), Western Cape (2) and Free State (1)**] in South Africa were represented.

### **Empirical Findings**

Ecosystems theory was used in this study to understand sociocultural systems in South Africa that encumber the disclosure of child sexual abuse amongst black male child victims. The following themes emerged in this study.

#### **Fear of the consequences to self**

Fear of consequences to self was found to be the most common reason for the black male child victims' non-disclosure of sexual abuse. This is similar to the study which was conducted by Kellogg, Koek, and Nienow (2020) who found that sometimes children delay to disclose sexual abuse because of the consequences to self. Participants have highlighted two variable leading male children to their fear of the disclosure of sexual abuse which are presented below as the sub-themes.

##### ***i) Fear of labelling and victimization***

Several studies found that child victims of sexual abuse withhold disclosure due to the fear of labelling and suffering prolonged victimization and not receiving necessary therapeutic intervention (Jones, 2000; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Hébert, Tourigny, Cyr, 2009; Allagia, 2010). Some participants indicated that they encounter challenges with regard to black male child victims of sexual abuse. They have stated that in most black communities, should it be known that a male child has been sexually abused, such children are more likely to be given derogatory names such as being called a gay. Thus, black male child victims of sexual abuse fear to be addressed as such. To them, by saying to somebody they were sexually abused, they are subsequently saying they have that 'feminine' thing attached to them. This is what one participant stated:

*“Boys who come from black African cultures for me still have that thing(pause), by saying to somebody they were sexually abused, there is this fear that people will think that have that 'feminine' thing attached to them”.*

In the same breath, the other participant echoed that:

*“Boys who come from certain black cultures do not easily disclose sexual abuse, more especially if it was perpetuated by people of the same sex because they fear to be labelled as gays.”*

In addition, the other participants indicated ones the community also has a problem of victimising boys who suffered sexual abuse by other men. They have indicated that they have assessed cases wherein sexual abuse of male children persisted whereby some members of the black community will take advantage of the child. Rapholo (2014)’s study amongst the Pedi tribe also has the same finding wherein caregivers of children postulated that they fear to disclosed sexual incidents that their children suffered from because other men in their community who are sexually interested to men will take advantage and victimise their children, It can be deduced from the findings that masculinity in the black African culture is valued, unfortunately it appears to have a very immense influence on the black male child victims’ reluctance to disclose their sexual abuse experiences. Black male child victims fear to disclose sexual abuse because fear to be labelled as homosexuals and that they might be victimised for that sexual act. The findings support Fontes and Plummer (2010) who postulate that it is difficult for boys to disclose sexual abuse by men, because such admission requires confession to having been victimized, which is a blow to their masculine image.

#### ***ii) Fear of embarrassment, blame and shame, and masculinity***

Sex is generally an embarrassing subject in most African cultures wherein people do not easily discuss about it, more especially when it comes to personal experiences (Goldstein, 1999). Other participants have indicated that from their experiences of assessing male children alleged to be sexually abused, more especially the older ones, such children feel embarrassed as opposed to female children, and it was highlighted that this practice mostly affect black children than white ones. This findings are partially similar to other international studies where is was found that the child’s involvement in a taboo topic, namely, sex with an adult (sex with a male adult in the context of this study) which is commonly found in older children and not on young ones render such children embarrassed and suffer feelings of shame for what they have experienced (Cronch, Viljoen & Hansen, 2006; Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg & Horowitz, 2006). Other participants added that male children who feel embarrassed often shame and blame themselves for the sexual abuse they have experienced. Some feel like they could have defended themselves as men and that how would their male counterparts and girls regard them. As such, they feel responsible for the incident and as a result do not disclose. Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones and Gordon (2003) from their study also found that children are less likely to disclose quickly if they feel responsible for the abuse and that they could have escaped or ended the abuse. Roesler and Wind (1994) established that children are reluctant to disclose their victimization due to shame and self-blame. Some participants made the following assertions:

*“For male children to talk about sexual activities, more especially older one, it is a shameful and embarrassing topic to talk about. Some feel so responsible for the abuse as they could have escaped and defended themselves. In such instances, it is very difficult for male children to disclose sexual abuse.”*

*“Other male children blame themselves for what sexual abuse and start to fear how their friends would regard them as. Some feel that their manhood was not enough. This feeling only occurs to the older male children which makes them less likely to disclose their sexual abuse experiences.”*

In light of the above findings, it can be deduced that the issue of masculinity plays an enormous role in the black male child victims of sexual abuse’ reluctance to disclose their sexual abuse experiences. Findings clearly indicate that such children oftenly preserve their virility. This is similar to the study by Ramphabana et al. (2019) who established that male children who attended male initiation schools were taught to be a strong, brave, and responsible man. To them, this would make them strong men when they get married. Therefore, disclosure of sexual abuse hardly takes place because of their fear of forfeiting chances of getting married. Attah (2016) on the other hand postulates that, their fear of being equated with females also increases their chances to disclose sexual abuse .To them, a male should be protective so as to avoid to be embarrassed by their counterparts and as a result, shame and blame themselves for what happened to them. According to Makhubu (2005) children who feel like this lose a sense of their entitlement to themselves and their right to determine what happened to them. This is a sense of being diminished (shame) and of having no right to power. Unfortunately, most studies conclude that most sexual offences against children occur amongst females than males as females disclose better than males (Dube, Anda, Whitfield, Brown, Felitti, Dong & Giles, 2005; Ullman & Filipas, 2005; Cashmore & Shackel, 2014). This research contradicts such previous studies in that sexual abuse occurs equally amongst genders, however, the integral part of it is disclosure. Male child victims, particularly those from black African communities, need an intensive assistance in terms of disclosing sexual abuse.

### **Patriarchal Values**

Children in most black African communities do not easily disclose sexual abuse because of the strong values of respect, particularly to older male relatives (Mathews et al., 2012; Ramphabana et al, 2019). Children are expected to respect elders. Some participants have stated that most cases of child sexual abuse that they investigated were intra-familial abuse wherein sometimes fathers of children were alleged perpetrators. In most traditional black African families, the father is the authoritative figure who makes rules over his family (Rapholo, 2018). It therefore is disrespectful to the head of the family (the father) who has perpetuated child sexual abuse against should it be disclosed to the outside world (Bronstein, 2006). One participant avowed that:

*“We really battle with African cultures, particularly amongst black Africans. Children regardless of gender who come from black African families are less likely to disclose sexual abuse as opposed to those coming from white cultures. If the abuse was perpetuated by the father of the child, due to the value of respect, child victims are socialised not to expose the head of the family to the outside world”.*

In the same wavelength, the other participants stated that:

*“Most cases that we deal with are intra-familial abuse where perpetrators are mostly fathers of children. In most African cultures, the father is the head of the family who has the power to rule over his family. So, even if there are suspicions of child sexual abuse in such families, their*



*children do not easily about their sexual abuse experiences as such will suggest that they are deviating from the rules of the family. If the victim child is a male, such children are even worse as they think this will also be fathers in the future”.*

The findings show patriarchy is used to justify the child sexual abuse amongst black male child victims in the context of this study by their fathers or father figures and also how it can deter disclosures. Children from many black African cultures are often socialized into a set of preconceived male ideologies that espouse the concepts of control, power and patriarchy (Higson-Smith et al., 2005). The issue of power and powerlessness according to Cossins (2000) is perceived as the core cause of the perpetration of child sexual abuse. For example, in most black African cultures a man (father) is viewed as the head of the family, given the fact that he holds all the power in the family. The gender inequality that is inherent in many black African families result in women being afforded a lower status than men. This suggests that even if a child decides to disclose sexual abuse that, if the father does not want to respond to the child's disclosure, such child will not disclose. The disclosure of child sexual abuse amongst black male children in the African communities is multiply determined by factors related to child characteristics such as gender, family dynamics, community context, and larger cultural and societal attitudes.

These factors develop fear amongst black male child victims of sexual abuse to disclose their sexual abuse experiences. For instance, children have a fear that should the community where they reside know about what occurred to them, they might label them as homosexuals and a continued victimisation is possible. Therefore, male victims of sexual abuse from the black community strive to protect their masculine image. Due to this masculinity, some male child victims from black communities, do not disclose sexual abuse due to the fear of embarrassment, shame and blame. To them, a man should all times be defensive and responsible for every event in their lifetime. Thus, if they can disclose sexual abuse, it will be such an embarrassment and shame by their male counterparts and they will start to blame themselves for not having defended themselves. This to them means they are not man enough. Patriarchy also came out during this study that in most African cultures men have more power over women and children. As a result of this, children, particularly those who were sexually abused by their fathers, keep such incidents to themselves as a way of showing respect to them.

### **Implication for Practice**

Although findings only focused on the voices of practitioners, it is necessary to have further research to learn from the side of black male child victims. Practitioners should at all times be culturally sensitive when assessing male children who come from black African communities and use approaches that will yield positive outcomes from their assessments. Practitioners should conduct a family and community study during the initial stage of assessing black African children to learn about their values, norms, beliefs and customs. Furthermore, practitioners should at all times when working with such children inquire about reasons for withholding information on their sexual abuse experiences. Promoting primary prevention is key, more especially in instance where children due to their masculine image do not want to disclose their sexual abuse encounters. Awareness campaigns should be strengthened and sustained, as these influences can have profound effects on how children perceive abuse, and anticipate responses to disclosure based on cultural messaging. There should be the development of special programmes for black male children which deal with cultural issues in

the disclosure of child sexual abuse. The promotion of such programmes can also reach out to parents and professionals to prepare them about possible disclosures and preferable responses.

## DECLARATION OF INTERESTS STATEMENT

The author declare that there this is their original work and that are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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