

Child Sexual Abuse among Urban Secondary School Pupils: Impact of Family Characteristics and Family Structure

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of family characteristics and family structure as risk factors for sexual abuse among urban secondary school pupils in Zimbabwe. It adopted a survey design as the operational framework for data gathering. Data were collected from three secondary schools in the Gweru district of Zimbabwe. The sample comprised 268 secondary pupils (50 % female; mean age=15.42, SD=1.376). Data were gathered by administering the Child Abuse Screening Tool Children's Version (ICAST-C). Of the 268 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 151 reported having been sexually abused in one or more ways before the age of 18 years, giving an overall prevalence rate of 56.3 %. Overall, the results show that the most important factors that were found to be consistently associated with child sexual abuse were parental absence, father's absence, mother's education, parental domestic violence and parental substance abuse. Risk of any child sexual abuse was not associated with the existence of siblings, household size, parental occupation and father's education. Policies should focus on supporting single mothers and parents who both work outside of the home to reduce the likelihood that children are left vulnerable and at risk of being sexually abused.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; family characteristics; family structure; secondary pupils; Zimbabwe.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an issue of veritable concern worldwide. It is associated with numerous deleterious consequences such as physical injury, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV and AIDS), emotional trauma, poor school performance, rejection by family and society, family disharmony, poor parenting and abusive behaviour in later life (Casey & Nurius, 2005; Spies, 2006; WHO, 2004; Wurtele, 2009; Zink et al., 2009). For instance, a study by Stirpe and Stermac (2003) reported that about one-third of violent and nonviolent offenders were survivors of child sexual abuse. In addition, research shows that more sexual offenders than nonsexual offenders significantly reported being survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Leung et al., 2010).

Socioeconomic status, employment, education level, marital relationships, family structure and substance abuse, have been reported to be associated with the perpetration of CSA (Bahal et al., 2010; Black, et al., 2001; Elbedour et al., 2006; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Holmes, 2007;

Hunter, 2006; King et al., 2004; Leung et al., 2010; Priebe & Svedin, 2009; Strega et al., 2008; Yen et al., 2008).

Several studies have confirmed the link between parental level of education and increased risk of being sexually abused (Chaffin et al., 1996; Elbedour et al., 2006; Finkelhor, 1980; Leung et al., 2010; Pinheiro, 2006; Yen et al., 2008). For instance, in a study that was conducted in the US, Chaffin et al. (1996) found that families with lower education levels were more likely to be significant features of cases encountered in child protection agencies, probably reflecting their increased likelihood of being detected and disproportionately reported. This finding is further supported by studies which have reported that mothers of those sexually abused are less likely to have finished high school (Finkelhor, 1979; Leventhal, 1998). In another study, Zuravin and DiBlassio (1992) also found that parental low education level was linked to increased risk for CSA. Although parental level of education seems to be a strong predictor of CSA, contradictory results have also been reported (Chen et al., 2004, 2006). However, as Elbedour et al. (2006) argue, parental successful academic experiences may play a protective role in preventing sexual victimisation. A possible explanation could be that educated parents are likely to make use of suggested prevention programmes and other available resources.

A review of socio-demographic risk factors of CSA based on a retrospective community study in the USA (Black, et al., 2001) revealed that parental occupational status was moderately related to having a child who was sexually abused. In the same vein, unemployment has been reported as a risk factor for sexual abuse (Townsend & Dawes, 2004). One prospective study suggested that children who had experienced CSA often grew up with parents who were unemployed (Horwitz et al., 2001). Unemployment may affect risk factors through the stress of reduced material resources, a sense of powerlessness in the unemployed parent, or through increased parent-child contact (Belsky, 1980). In the same vein, maternal employment brings significant stresses into the parent-child relationship and has implications in terms of childcare arrangements, but may also act as a protective factor through a range of social-psychological benefits (Sidebotham & Heron, 2006). In a study that was conducted among female high school students in Israel, higher occupational status of the father was associated with higher likelihood of sexual abuse (Elbedour et al., 2006). Such a finding is as important as it is puzzling. However, it is not clear whether the findings indicate that daughters of fathers with high occupational status actually experience higher rates of sexual abuse or whether they are more likely to report such abuse, for example, because they are more liberated and perhaps empowered and therefore, are less likely to fear the consequences of self-disclosure such as family dishonour .

Extant studies have reported an association between parental absence and history of CSA. For instance, being raised without one's father, or living apart from one's mother for a significant part of one's childhood, have been associated with CSA (Cole, 1995; Collings, 1991; Finkelhor, 1980, 1984). Living with one biological parent has been found to be related to sexual abuse, consistent with other studies (Holmes & Slap, 1998). In a study that was conducted in South Africa (Jewkes, Levin, Mbananga, & Bradshaw, 2002) adolescents who were not living with a biological father reported an increased risk of teenage pregnancy. This finding suggests that parental figures can play an important role by providing greater control and restrictions on youth risk behaviour, which may lead to a lesser likelihood of incest and increased protection from potential perpetrators (Jewkes et al., 2002). In the literature, there is substantial agreement concerning family structure in that not living with both biological parents places a child at high risk of CSA (Bahal et al., 2010; Fergusson et al., 1997; Fergusson & Mullen, 1999; Holmes & Slap, 1998; Madu, 2002). Nevertheless, Ricket and colleagues (2004) found no association between CSA and living together with both, one, or no parent. However, evidence contrary to Ricket and colleagues' (2004) finding seems to be overwhelming. For example, several studies have shown children to be at higher risk of CSA when they live in single-parent (Berger, 2004; Dubowitz, 1999; Lauritsen, 2003) or reconstituted families (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormstad, 2007). In the same vein, several studies have reported that children living with divorced or single parents or stepfamilies were at two to three times higher risk of CSA (Bahal et al., 2010; Black, et al., 2001; Brown et al., 1998;

Sidebotham & Heron, 2006). In addition, youth in stepfamilies have been reported to be at risk, relative to other family structures, of sexual assault and parental assault, with a variety of other predictors controlled (Finkelhor & Asdigian, 1996). In reconstituted families, the stepfather appears to double the risk for CSA for girls (Brown et al., 1998). The behaviour of stepfathers in this context may be attributed to a lack of emotional attachment to the girl child whom they may not see as their biological offspring.

Several studies that were conducted in Zimbabwe have also reported a link between parental absence and CSA (Chiroro et al., 2006; Dzikira, 2007; Feist-Price et al., 2002). For instance, Dzikira (2007) reported that children whose parents were cross-borders were more likely to report having been sexually abused than those whose parents were present most of the time. In another study, Chiroro et al. (2006) reported that girls who were brought up by their brothers-in-law were at risk of being sexually abused by them. This suggests that the cultural practice whereby the brother-in-law plays with his young sisters-in-law, (as a way of preparing her for marriage) touching their body parts especially breasts, still exists in some sections of the Zimbabwean society.

Several studies have linked parental substance abuse to CSA (Berger & Waldfogel, 2000; Finkelhor, 1979; Horwitz et al., 2001; Hunter, 2006; Walsh et al., 2003; Velleman et al., 2008; Velleman & Reuber, 2007). One prospective study suggested that children who had experienced CSA often grew up in families where parents used drugs or alcohol (Horwitz et al., 2001). In addition, a retrospective study that was conducted in Canada (Walsh et al., 2003), reported that respondents with sexual abuse increased by twofold among those reporting parental substance abuse histories. Yen et al. (2008) argue that an adult who is abusing substances sometimes does not make rational choices in life. Research shows that in cases where the substance abuser is a parent, chemical dependence is likely to lead to parenting styles that are detrimental to children (Berger, 2005; Hampton, Senatore, & Gullota, 1998). This suggests that parents who abuse substances may face tremendous obstacles in providing the safe home environment and warm care-giving that have been identified as buffers against CSA. This implies that, parental substance abuse may create an environment that is favourable for the perpetration of CSA by incapacitating parents from giving the necessary monitoring and supervision.

Strong family relationships may act as a buffer against the perpetration of CSA. Several studies suggest that sexual abuse often takes place in non-nurturing environmental and familial contexts (Brown et al., 1999; Meyerson, Long, Miranda, & Marx, 2002) such as poor parent-child relationships and family stress (Brown et al., 1998; Yen et al. 2008). In a study that was conducted by Alexander (1992), it was noted that insecure interpersonal attachment in a family, such as between a daughter and a father who seems to reject her, may increase the risk of CSA in that family. This finding has far reaching implications on intra-familial sexual abuse in that, on one hand adult perpetrators who are not strongly attached to their children may have poor control of their impulses toward them. On the other hand, non-offending parents who are not attached to their children may not notice that the child is being sexually abused. As a result, children may be more willing to submit to sexual abuse if it seems a way to build attachments they otherwise lack (Yuen, 2007). For instance, children may end up seeking advice from their peers, sugar daddies or mummies, who are likely to mislead and expose them to sexual abuse. Holt et al's. (2008) review that was conducted within an 11-year framework (1995-2006) established that children and adolescents living with domestic violence are at increased risk of experiencing sexual abuse and behavioural problems and of increased exposure to the presence of other adversities in their lives. As Finkelhor et al. (2009) further argue, in families characterised by considerable chaos and lack of interpersonal attachment, multiple, ongoing problems and/or conflicts, children may be poorly supervised and subjected to a considerable amount of dislocation that exposes them to victimisation in different contexts. Related to the foregoing observations is that children without secure parental relationships may also be less likely to disclose sexual abuse experiences to their parents or other adults, thereby perpetuating the problem.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the prevalence of CSA among secondary school pupils in Gweru, Zimbabwe, in connection to family structure. Although it is known that a number of factors are associated with the perpetration of sexual abuse, very few studies have investigated these factors among urban secondary schools in Zimbabwe, despite the existence of research suggesting that the urban environment predisposes children to sexual abuse. The few studies that are available have either targeted females (Chiroro et al., 2006; Gwirayi & Shumba, 2008) or have been conducted in big cities such as Harare (Khan, 1995) and Bulawayo (Meursing et al., 1995). The identification of risk factors has serious implications for both preventive and intervention strategies.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The centrality of the research design in any research endeavour is highlighted by Hall (1996, p. 17) who says that “the test question for any academic discussion which is based on research findings is whether the conclusions are justified by the research design”. This study adopted the descriptive survey strategy because survey research has the capacity to collect data for describing populations that are too large to observe directly (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Using this design, this study was able to establish factors, which exposed secondary school pupils in Gweru urban district, to the various forms of sexual abuse.

2.2 Participants

The sample comprised 268 pupils attending Gweru district day secondary schools (50 % female; mean age=15.42, SD=1.376). The identification of these participants was based on three premises. First, local literature shows that secondary school pupils are vulnerable to sexual abuse (Makoni, 2006; Masvingise, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Second, as adolescents, secondary school pupils are a high risk population group as they are more likely to be sexually active. Third, these pupils were preferred because they were believed to be mature enough to have the language to express their perspectives in English.

2.3 Sampling Procedure

A two-stage random sampling procedure was used. In the first stage, three day secondary schools were randomly selected from a cluster of seven in Gweru district. In the second stage, stratified random sampling was used to select Form 2 and 4 pupils at each participating school (Marvasti, 2004).

2.4 Measures

The Child Abuse Screening Tool Children’s Version (ICAST-C) (Zolotor et al., 2009), which is a new, multi-national and multi-cultural child abuse and research tool, was adopted.

CSA

Respondents were asked to indicate their frequency of experiencing the nine forms of sexual abuse (contact and noncontact) on a four point scale ranging from “many times” to “not in the past year but this has happened”. If respondents answered “no” to all nine statements, they

were coded 0 (no sexual abuse); if they answered “yes” to any of the nine statements, they were coded as 1 (sexually abused), consistent with previous studies (Gault-Sherman et al., 2009; Raviv et al., 2010; Tyler, Johnson & Brownridge, 2008).

Predictors of CSA

Parental education Respondents were asked to provide information about their parents’ (both father and mother) level of education. Responses were coded as 0 (primary), 1 (secondary), 2 (college), 3 (university) and 4 (this does not apply to me I don’t have a father (mother)).

Parental occupation Respondents were also asked to provide information about their parents’ (both father and mother) occupation. Responses were coded as 0 (unemployed), 1 (working full time), 2 (working part time), 3 (doing own business) and 4 (does not apply to me, I don’t have a father (mother)).

Parental presence A dichotomous variable was used to measure parental presence as follows: Do you live with your parents? Mother Yes/No Father Yes/No

Parental substance abuse Has one of your parents used drugs and/or alcohol and then behaved in a way that frightened you? Yes/No

Domestic violence Have you seen adults in your home shouting and yelling at each other in a way that frightened you?

Have you seen adults in your home hit, kick, slap, punch each other or hurt each other physically in other ways? Responses to both questions were coded as 0 (never), 1 (sometimes) and 2 (many times).

Household size How many rooms are there in your present house?

Number of siblings In total, how many brothers and sisters you have including yourself?

2.5 Data Collection Procedure

The research instrument was administered personally by the researcher in order to ensure a high response rate (Sarantakos, 2005). On the agreed dates with the school heads, and with the cooperation of the class teachers, the researcher distributed the questionnaires to the pupils in their classrooms. Data were collected during free periods in order to minimise interruption of other school activities. Participants were required to sit separately so that they could feel free to complete the questionnaire without sharing their answers.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Before collecting data, the researcher sought for permission from the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture, which was granted. In addition, the researcher also asked for informed consent from all the participants (Sarantakos, 2005). The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants and allowed them to ask questions about the research before asking them to complete the questionnaire (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). It was also made clear to the participants that taking part in the study was voluntary, and that those who chose to participate were free to withdraw their participation at any stage if they so wished.

The school counsellor was available during the administration of questionnaires in order to provide counselling and follow-up in the event of any pupil showing emotional distress (Yuen, 2007). In addition, all participants were given information pamphlets on Gweru based organisations which provide professional assistance on issues relating to CSA.

2.7 Data Analysis

The Odds Ratio (OR) in cross-sectional studies such as this is a measure of the strength of the association between a dichotomous exposure (CSA/No CSA) and risk factors of sexual abuse. The Confidence Interval (95 %) is the range within which the true OR is likely to fall. If the

interval does not extend below 1.0, then the OR is statistically significant (equivalent to $p < .05$). A correlation matrix was also used to analyse the association between CSA and risk factors.

3. Results

3.1 Prevalence of CSA

Of the 268 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 151 reported having been sexually abused in one or more ways before the age of 18 years, giving an overall prevalence rate of 56.3 %.

3.2 CSA and Family Characteristics

Results on family characteristics associated with CSA are summarised in Tables 1, 2 and 3. The multiple logistic regression analysis and the correlation matrix together showed that five factors were found to be significantly correlated with sexual abuse; not living with both parents, not living with father, mother's level of education, parental domestic violence and parental alcoholism.

Contrary to popular belief, the multiple logistic regression analysis (Table 1 and Table 2) did not report any associations between CSA and variables such as father's education, parental occupation, and child's gender. First, the analysis of the correlates of CSA was done by separating the logistic regression model for sexual abuse by gender.

3.2.1 Risk Factors for CSA by Gender of Respondents

Separate gender models (Table 1) revealed two statistically significant correlates of sexual abuse. Both were reported in the logistic model consisting only of males. Male respondents whose mothers had achieved secondary education had greater odds (5.00 times) of experiencing sexual abuse compared to those whose had minimal or higher education. Parental alcoholism elevated the odds of male adolescents experiencing sexual abuse by almost three times.

Table 1 Ordinal Logistic Regression Models for Sexual Abuse Separated by Gender

Variable in model	Females odds ratios (95 % CIs)	Male odds ratios (95 % CIs)
Father's education		
No education	2.33 (.99-5.49)	0
Primary	.66 (.13-3.45)	.63 (.16-2.49)
Secondary	1.06 (.38-3.01)	2.06 (.72-5.91)
College/University	.82 (.34-2.01)	.40 (.17-.96)
Mother's education		

No education	.75 (.08-7.21)	1.00 (.15-6.77)
Primary	.94 (.44- 8.45)	.53 (.17-1.70)
Secondary	.95 (.36-2.47)	5.00 (1.21-20.61)
College/University	.69 (.24-2.00)	.30 (.67-1.31)
Mothers' occupation		
Unemployed	1.07 (.39-2.95)	1.13 (.38-3.35)
Working full time	.97 (.24-4.00)	1.57 (.40-6.14)
Working part time	1.30 (.31- 5.39)	.58 (.15-2.26)
Doing own business	.59 (.21-1.65)	1.18 (.39-3.64)
Father's occupation		
Unemployed	1.89 (.41-8.85)	2.74 (.64-11.82)
Working full time	.22 (.23-2.12)	.28 (.028-2.92)
Working part time	1.60 (.10-24.70)	5.00 (.34-72.77)
Doing own business	1.91 (.35- 10.54)	.31(.67-1.41)
Live with mother		
No	1.39 (.64-3.03)	.92 (.42-2.01)
Yes	.72 (.33-1.57)	1.09 (.50-2.39)
Live with father		
No	1.13 (.57-2.23)	1.95 (.97-3.93)
Yes	.89 (.45-1.75)	.51 (.25-1.03)
Live with both parents		
No	1.23 (.62-2.43)	1.68 (.84-3.37)
Yes	.81 (.41-1.61)	.59 (.30-1.19)
Parental substance abuse		
No	.04 (.41-2.60)	.34 (.12-.99)
Yes	.96 (.38- 2.42)	2.93 (1.01-8.52)

3.2.2 Risk Factors for CSA by Respondents' Level of Education

Models separated by the respondents' level of education showed three statistically significant variations on correlates of sexual abuse (Table 2). The logistic regression model consisting only of Form 2 respondents showed that the odds of experiencing sexual abuse were higher among those who did not live with both parents than those with both parents (OR=2.22, CI=1.10-4.48). Furthermore, Form 2 respondents who did not stay with their fathers had greater odds (2.34 times) of experiencing sexual abuse compared to those who stayed with their fathers. The logistic regression model consisting only of those in Form 4 showed that respondents whose mothers had obtained secondary education (OR=3.91, CI=1.18-12.99) were more likely to have been sexually abused than those whose mothers had either lower or higher levels of education.

Table 2 Ordinal Logistic Regression Models for Sexual Abuse Separated by Respondents' Level of Education

Variable in model	Form 2 odds ratios (95 % CIs)	Form 4 odds ratios (95 % CIs)
Father's education		
No education	0	1.00 (.10-9.61)
Primary	1.00 (.19-5.33)	.40 (.99-1.62)
Secondary	1.59 (.52-4.91)	1.75 (.60-5.09)
College/University	.31 (.12-.81)	.86 (.36-2.05)
Mother's education		
No education	.70 (.049-10.01)	.63 (.09-4.40)
Primary	.85 (.24-3.00)	1.23 (.30-5.05)
Secondary	.84 (.30-2.33)	3.91 (1.18-12.99)
College/University	.62 (.21-1.80)	.48 (.13-1.81)
Mothers' occupation		
Unemployed	.41 (.14-1.19)	2.69 (.91-7.95)
Working full time	1.50 (.34-6.56)	1.00 (.27-3.72)
Working part time	1.56 (.35-6.94)	.47 (.12-1.76)
Doing own business	1.15 (.71- 1.84)	.71 (.39- 1.33)

Table 2 (Continued). Ordinal Logistic Regression Models for Sexual Abuse Separated by Respondents' Level of Education

Variable in model	Form 2 odds ratios (95 % CIs)	Form 4 odds ratios (95 % CIs)
Father's occupation		
Unemployed	2.35 (.47-11.78)	2.10 (.50-8.84)
Working full time	.36 (.25-.53)	.42 (.78-2.31)
Working part time	3.00 (.97-9.30)	1.50 (.18-12.46)
Doing own business	.33 (.57-1.92)	1.20 (.27-5.31)
Live with mother		
No	1.94 (.92-4.08)	.65 (.28-1.50)
Yes	.52 (.25-1.09)	1.55 (.69-3.60)
Live with father		
No	2.34 (1.17- 4.69)	1.04 (.51-2.11)
Yes	.43 (.21-.86)	.96 (.47-1.95)
Live with both parents		
No	2.22 (1.10-4.48)	1.06 (.53-2.14)
Yes	.5 (.22-.91)	.94(.48-1.91)
Parental substance abuse		
No	.78 (.27-2.23)	.60 (.24-1.48)
Yes	1.29 (.45-3.68)	1.68 (.68-4.18)

Pearson correlation coefficients, means and standard deviations of the variables of interest are presented in Table 3. From Table 3, it can be observed that respondents, who reported parental domestic violence were more likely to be exposed to sexual abuse than those who scored less on parental domestic violence. Household size and number of siblings were not correlated with sexual abuse.

Table 3 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Coefficients among the Variables Included in the Analyses.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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1 Family interaction									
2 Household size	.01								
3 Number of siblings	.02	.24**							
4 Form	-.08	-.17**	.02						
5 Domestic violence	-.21**	.03	.01	.20**					
6 Neighbourhood	-.05	.03	-.06	.10	.15*				
7 Sexual abuse	-.07	.00	-.03	.12	.27**	.15*			
8 age	-.14*	-.16*	.02	.80**	.22**	.08	.13*		
<i>Mean</i>	6.09	5.72	3.90	3.00	1.37	7.87	2.73	15.42	
<i>Standard deviation</i>	2.33	2.82	1.66	1.00	1.83	3.57	3.98	1.38	

** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$

Correlation coefficients are calculated based on pair wise deletion of the missing cases.

4. Discussion

The principal objective of this study was to determine the prevalence of CSA in connection to family characteristics. An overall prevalence rate of 56.3 % was reported. This rate is way above those that have been found in developed as well as other African countries. However, it is comparable to rates that have been reported in African countries such as Nigeria 55 % (Olley, 2008) and South Africa 54.2 % (Madu & Peltzer, 2000).

The presence of both parents as a buffer against the perpetration of CSA is unequivocal from the research findings of this study. It was established that, the odds of experiencing sexual abuse were higher among Form 2 respondents who did not stay with both parents than those with both parents. This finding could be attributed to the age of the survivors relative to their Form 4 counterparts. In this regard, the finding from this study is consistent with numerous earlier studies (Bahal et al., 2010; Dzikira, 2007; King et al., 2004; Leung et al., 2010, Madu, 2002; UNICEF, 2010) which reported that not living with both biological parents places a child at high risk of CSA.

Consistent with research (Jewkes et al., 2002; Strega et al., 2009), this study established that, Form 2 respondents who did not stay with their fathers had greater odds of experiencing sexual abuse compared to those who stayed with their fathers. While this finding is consistent with available research in Zimbabwe, concerning the vulnerability of children in this age group (Khan, 1995; Rudd, 2004), it also buttresses the protective role of fathers against CSA. As Jewkes et al. (2002) earlier reported in a South African study, parental figures especially fathers can play an important role by providing greater control and restrictions on youth risk behaviour, which may lead to a lesser likelihood of incest and increased protection from potential perpetrators.

While one-parent homes may confer risk by increasing total parental absence (Holmes, 2007), the situation may be aggravated by parental employment. Parents may be temporarily available due to employment outside the home (Leung et al., 2010; Townsend & Dawes, 2004). Consistent with this finding, this study established that, some survivors of CSA were living on their own because their parents were either away on work-related business, were

cross-border traders, or had migrated to the Diaspora, leaving them on their own. Due to lack of parental guidance, supervision, and protection, some children ended up being exposed to sexual abuse. By and large, this study confirms existing literature in reporting family structure as a risk factor for the perpetration of sexual abuse.

This study established that parental occupation is not a risk factor of sexual abuse. While this finding is consistent with some studies (Chen et al., 2004, 2006) it is contrary to others (Black et al., 2001; Elbedour et al., 2006; Horwitz et al., 2001; Holmes & Slap, 1998; Townsend & Dawes, 2004; Velleman et al., 2008). In contemporary Zimbabwe, unemployment has reached phenomenal proportions. Specifically, in Gweru where the study was conducted, the economic meltdown has led to massive retrenchments in big companies. It is rather puzzling that this has not compounded children's vulnerability given that they have been reported to supplement meagre family resources by engaging in sexual activities.

This study established startling findings on mother's education as a risk factor for CSA. The odds of experiencing sexual abuse were greater among male respondents whose mothers had achieved secondary education compared to those whose mothers had minimal education. This finding contradicts previous studies that have reported that mothers of those sexually abused are less likely to have finished high school (Finkelhor, 1979; Leventhal, 1998), and that little parental education predisposes children to sexual abuse (Bahal et al., 2010; Leung et al., 2008; Olley, 2008; Yen et al., 2008). Unfortunately, there are no studies from Zimbabwe to either confirm or refute this finding. One possible explanation could be that, mothers with secondary education had better employment opportunities compared with those with no education or with primary education alone. In this regard, their working outside the family could have exposed their children to sexual abuse through lack of maternal protection and supervision, thereby diminishing maternal availability. It could not be confirmed whether male respondents exposed themselves to CSA by being more adventurous in the absence of parental monitoring and supervision. This finding is important in that it showed that, even mother's higher level of education can also indirectly predict children's exposure to sexual abuse.

In this study, it emerged that there was a statistically significant relationship between reporting presence of parental domestic violence and exposure to CSA. This finding is consistent with several previous studies (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Holt et al., 2008). For instance, a review that was conducted by Holt et al. (2008) reported that children and adolescents living with domestic violence are at increased risk of experiencing sexual abuse. The foregoing view is further corroborated by Finkelhor et al. (2009) who established that in families characterised by parental domestic violence, children may be poorly supervised and subjected to a considerable amount of dislocation that exposes them to sexual abuse.

The deleterious effects of parental substance abuse on children's lives can be hardly disputed. It emerged in this study that, parental substance abuse increased the odds of male adolescents experiencing sexual abuse by almost three times. Although this finding is consistent with research in confirming an association between parental substance abuse and CSA (Hunter, 2006; Velleman et al., 2008; Velleman & Templeton, 2007; Yen et al., 2008), few studies have reported the influence of gender in their investigations (Walsh et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, there are no known studies that were conducted in Zimbabwe, against which the finding from this study can be compared. It therefore remains difficult to explain why male respondents were at a greater risk of experiencing sexual abuse in the presence of parental substance abuse. In this study, it could not be confirmed whether boys more than girls were more likely to be mischievous by engaging in risky sexual behaviour in their unsafe home environments, devoid of parental monitoring and supervision, in the wake of parental substance abuse. Also, what could have compounded the complication in this study was that no distinction was made between parental, paternal and maternal substance abuse.

Conclusion

This study established a high prevalence rate of CSA which was associated with a wide range of family characteristics, and mediated by respondent's gender and level of education. Overall, the results show that the most important factors that were found to be consistently associated with CSA were parental absence, father's absence, mother's education, parental domestic violence and parental alcoholism. Risk of any CSA was not associated with the existence of siblings, household size, parental occupation and father's education. Policies should focus on supporting single mothers and parents who both work outside of the home to reduce the likelihood that children are left vulnerable and at risk of being sexually abused.

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