



RESEARCH ARTICLE

GENDER DIFFERENTIALS IN NATURE AND EXPERIENCES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE:  
A CASE OF LUSAKA

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, child sexual abuse has been a global phenomenon. Various studies have been documented on the causes and outcomes of such an act on a child. This study however aimed at investigating the gender differentials in nature and experiences of child sexual abuse. Using various methods and techniques like descriptive designs, in-depth interviews and qualitative and quantitative methods, the study based its research on 70 respondents, 10 boys and 60 girls, between the ages 8 and 18. The respondents were all sexually abused victims at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Lusaka. According to the study, it was found that while the female sex was most prone to sexual abuse, boys experienced and disclosed their experience longer than girls. It is for this reason that children should be aware on the issues of child sexual abuse from a tender age. Thus providing them with information on what to do when a perpetrator approaches them, how to protect themselves and what to do if sexually abused. This would also lessen on the misconception society imposes on both sexes, particularly boys.

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INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) continues to be a major public health problem both in developed and developing countries. Worldwide, child abuse, specifically child sexual abuse has become the object of significant public attention in recent times. To mitigate, countries have made several efforts such as ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the rights of the child, all of which have elements of protection against this vice in addition to strict laws. Despite this, the scourge continues unabated. The 2006 World Report on Violence against Children estimates that in 2002 approximately 150 million girls and 73 million boys were subjected to contact CSA worldwide, including 1.2 million trafficked children and 1.8 million exploited through prostitution or pornography (Pinheiro, 2006; ILO, 2002). Other research indicates that up to 36% of girls and 29% of boys have suffered CSA; up to 46% girls and 20% boys have experienced sexual coercion. In other studies done in twenty four countries across the globe, findings indicated that between 8 - 31 percent of girls and 3-17 percent of boys experienced childhood sexual abuse (Barth *et al.*, 2013). The magnitude of the problem in Africa is not accurately known but the limited data available shows that the prevalence of CSA in the region is not anywhere

better than those from outside the continent. For instance, it is estimated that CSA cases are in the range of 28 to 33 percent for girls and 9 to 18 percent for boys (UNICEF, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006), a statistic which keeps rising (Pinheiro, 2006). A review article of CSA in Sub-Saharan Africa, puts the range between 3.2% and 7.1% of all respondents who reported unwanted or forced sexual intercourse before the age of 18 years (Lalor *et al.*, 2004). In Zambia, 366 cases of child defilement were reported by the Zambia Police (VCU) in the year 2000 while in 2001 the number doubled to 715. Between January and June 2003, a total of 470 cases of child defilement were reported to the police through the VCU (Mulenga and Tembo, 2003). Over 6000 girls were said to have been defiled between 2010 and 2013; and in 2015 alone UTH recorded 1182 cases (Adamu, 2015). Also, according to Kachemba (2008), 90 percent of the sexual offences recorded at Zambia's UTH were between a girl and an adult male, showing that there are more girls than boys who suffer sexual abuse. This was also observed in findings by Akani (2015), who conducted a study on characteristics of sexually abused children in Zambia with 192 participants consisting of 3 boys and 189 girls, aged between 4 to 15 years. 99% of the participants were referrals from the police. This study revealed that all the abusers were male neighbors, boyfriends and non-relative adults constituting. In a pilot study conducted at the UTH in Lusaka, Zambia, in 2003, 99% of sexually abused children reporting to the gynecology ward were females (Chomba *et al.*, 2010). While there is much information about the magnitude of Child Sexual Abuse in

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Zambia, there is a general deficiency in gender disaggregated information on the nature in which it manifests. According to a survey by Chomba *et al.* (2010), of the 3,360 adolescents (defined as age 10 to 19 years) in the survey, it was found that 9% of adolescents reported a family member touching their breasts or genitals, 3% reported sexual intercourse, 2% reported oral sex, and 1% reported anal sex by a family member. However, minimal information was given on the differentiated experiences of females and males with this regard apart from the fact that females were more likely to have been touched sexually than their male counterparts while males were more likely than females to have had sexual intercourse or oral sex with a family member.

In a study by UNICEF (2003) conducted in Zambia to assess and determine the extent of child sexual abuse, its related factors and the extent to which it is underreported, results of the study showed that female children are more at risk of sexual abuse, with 72% of female children experiencing this form of abuse compared to 28% of males. More than one quarter of the children who had been abused reported that most of their time was spent around the home (UNICEF, 2003), implying that a considerable amount of sexual abuse takes place in the vicinity of the home, and sometimes within the home itself. These findings further suggested that about one in every five cases of sexual abuse is likely to occur around the market and trading areas and another fifth in or near to the home. The study further found traditional ceremonies to be facilitators of the occurrence of sexual child abuse. Nevertheless, very little was revealed about the gender differences in experiences. Child Sexual Abuse if not addressed can have severe short term and long term consequences (Al-Mahroos *et al.*, 2011).

This problem holds profound implications for mental and physical health as well as psychological wellbeing. More worrisome has been the phenomenon of survivors in future turning into offenders, thereby perpetuating the vicious cycle of CSA which continues from generation to generation (Cosentino and Collins, 1996). Studies also contended that a broad range of behavioral difficulties result in sexually abused children. Notable ones being sexualized behavior patterns such as open and compulsive masturbation, sexualized play with dolls, seductive behavior, age-inappropriate sexual knowledge and sexual aggression that is, coercing others to repeat and re-enact the sexual victimization. On a similar note, a study conducted on violence and post-traumatic stress disorder in five countries found that 83% of the respondents in the study who were in prostitution including Zambia had indicated a history of child sexual abuse (Farley *et al.*, 1998).

Attesting to the extreme difficulty of revealing the secret, studies have continued to show the fact that many children who are suspected victims of child maltreatment are reluctant to allege abuse when formally interviewed even when there is clear evidence that they were in fact abused (Hershkowitz, 2014). These children suffer the negative effects of childhood sexual abuse which continues even in their adult lives. For instance, a retrospective cohort study about abuse during childhood, household dysfunction and multiple other health related issues was conducted from 1995 to 1997 among 17,337 adults in San Diego, California. The study found that contact CSA was reported by 16% of males and 25% of females. Compared to reporting no sexual abuse, a history of suicide attempt was more than twice as likely among both men and women who experienced childhood sexual abuse. Compared

with those who did not report CSA, men and women exposed to child sexual abuse were at a 40% increased risk of marrying an alcoholic, and a 40% to 50% increased risk of reporting current problems within their marriage (Dube *et al.*, 2005). In view of such consequences, the problem of Child Sexual Abuse calls for urgent intervention. However, intervention efforts can only be effective if context specific and this can only be possible given adequate information on differentials in nature and experiences of child sexual abuse. Without such information, a homogenous approach may be taken in assisting victims ignoring their different experiences, which may render such efforts ineffective. It is in this view that this research was conducted: to investigate the gender differentials in nature and experiences of child sexual abuse.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

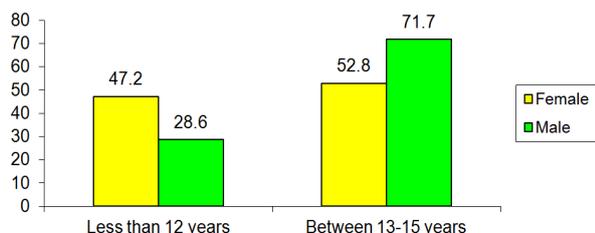
To enable the researcher get a clear picture on the nature and experiences of child sexual abuse, the study used a descriptive study design. Both quantitative and qualitative information was collected in order to have a holistic approach and to compensate for the inadequacies and maximize the benefits from the advantages of both of them. The use of in-depth interviews in this case helped to bring out children's experiences together with feelings and emotions that were attached to child sexual abuse disclosures. The study was conducted at Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) in Lusaka, a center where children who allege sexual abuse are referred for counseling or shelter protection. The target population was 150 past victims of sexual abuse associated with YWCA, with a focus on 70 participants who had experienced their first sexual abuse before the age of 16 years. This group study consisted of 10 boys and 60 girls between the ages of 8 and 18 years in light of research categorization of this age group as the age group where the country has witnessed the most defilement cases. 60 participants were drawn from this population to participate in the quantitative research and simple random sampling was used to select the participants from the list of clients who had previously been seen by YWCA. By using this method in this study, each member of the population under study was given an equal chance of being selected and the probability of a member of the population being selected was unaffected by the selection of other members of the population, meaning each selection was entirely independent of the next. The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data.

## Ethical Consideration

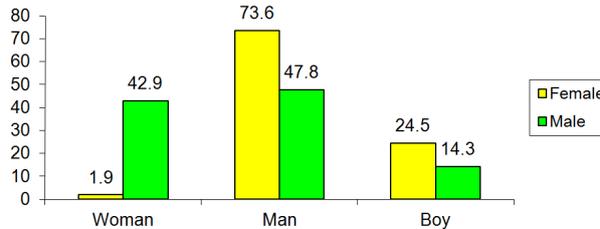
Before commencement of the study, permission was sought from the Director of Research and Graduate Studies of the University of Zambia, parents of the participants, boys and girls who participated in the study and YWCA. Each individual was made aware of the fact that participation in this study was voluntary and that they were free to discontinue the study at any point, if they felt the need. Care was taken to avoid causing undue stress or discomfort to the respondents. Explanations were made in simple terms so that the participants were fully able to understand the voluntary decisions about their participation. For this reason, the researcher utilized both verbal and written documents to convey this message and used a language the children were able to understand.

**Table 1. Percentage of sexual experiences of girls and boys**

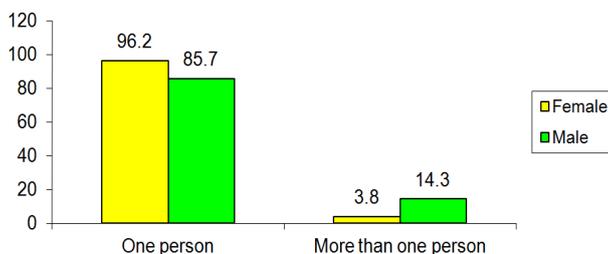
Type of sexual experiences	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total (%)
Boys and girls who experienced unwanted touching of your breasts, vagina or bottom over their clothes	92.5	57.1	88.3
Boys and girls who experienced kissing on their mouth	83.5	85.7	83.3
Boys and girls who had someone exposure their sexual parts to them	88.7	85.7	88.3
Boys and girls who experienced vaginal sex	98.3	42.5	93.3
Boys and girls who had experienced anal sex	22.6	57.1	26.7
Boys and girls who had experienced oral sex	28.3	85.7	35.0



**Figure 1. Percentage of boys and girls who reported age at when first abused**



**Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who reported the identity of the perpetrator**



**Figure 3. Percentage of respondents who reported the number of sexual perpetrators**

**Table 5. Percentage of Relationship with Perpetrator**

Relationship with the perpetrator	Female (%)	Male (%)	Total
Father	5.7	0.0	5
Step mother	0.0	28.6	3.3
Step father	9.4	0.0	8.3
Uncle	20.8	28.6	21.6
Male relative	20.8	0.0	18.3
Neighbor	13.2	14.3	13.4
Male family friend	9.4	0.0	8.3
Other	15.2	28.6	16.8

**Analysis of Findings**

Respondents were asked a number of questions on the type of sexual abuse they had experienced. Table 1, shows that 92.5% of girls and 57.1% of boys said they have had someone touch their breasts, vagina or “bottom” over their clothes, 88.7% girls and 85.7% boys said they had someone expose sexual parts to them, 83% girls and 85.7% boys said someone had attempted to kiss them on their mouth, 100% girls and 42.9% boys had experienced vaginal abuse, 22.6% girls and 57.1% boys had experienced anal sex while 28.3% girls and 85.7% boys had experienced oral sex. In describing his experience, a 17 year old boy narrated his experience of sexual encounters he suffered with the following words: “It started with watching movies with my friends which a certain man brought. We would watch men and women putting penis in the mouth. A man suggested that, ‘you have seen what they are doing you too can make a film and make money from doing this.’ So I told him cannot put a penis in the mouth.

Then he said, ‘but this will be able to take you to school and you can start going to school again. You are the one who has been complaining that your guardians don’t have money to send me to school.’ So, I asked how much money he was talking about. He told me he would make enough money for me to go back to school and finish. So, that is how I got interested and we started having both oral and anal sex with my older friend who was 25 years old then. Then the same man made the tape and took it to ‘the boss’ who watched it and was very pleased. Then he said, ‘okay, this is good we are going to see which school we can take you to.’ That is how I continued to have oral and anal sex just in order for me to go back to school. The experience was very painful on my anus even now. It has been over 3 months since I last did it but I still feel the pain”. When respondents were also asked about the age they were when first abused, 47.2% of girls and 28.6% boys said that the abuse occurred when they were less than 12 years old, 47% girls and 71.5% boys said when they were between the ages of 13- 15 years as shown in Figure 1. In narrating how her first experience of abuse, one 18 year old girl narrated: “It started

when I was thirteen years when I just reached puberty. My mother went for a funeral for two days and I remained with my father and my young brother. That is when my father called me and said that, 'you, you know that I am your father? Do you know that in our tradition if a child reaches puberty she should have sex with the father?' Then I responded saying I wasn't aware and that he couldn't do that to me. That is when he said that he has to be the first one and that is how it has always been done. Upon saying that, he grabbed me and took me to the bedroom and started touching my breasts and vagina and got his penis and forced it in my vagina."

The study also sought to find out the sex of most abusers. Findings as shown in Figure 2 were that 1.9% girls and 42.9% boys were abused by a woman; 73.4% girls and 42.9% boys were abused by a man, while 24.5% girls and 14.3% boys said they were abused by a boy. The results showed that most of the abusers are men. This information is illustrated by the Table 2. Further, the study sought to find out the number of abusers encountered by each victim. Findings as shown in Figure 3 indicated that 96.2% girls and 85.7% boys reported being abused by one person, while 3.8% girls and 14.3% boys said they were abused by more than one person. All in all, the majority of respondents were abused by a single person. There were however isolated cases of those abused by more than one person like one 18 old boy who revealed how he suffered multiple sexual abuse encounters which lasted for over 5 years from his 35 year old Aunt which started when he was 11 years old. He said, "We had sex so many times that I can't even remember how many times it was. I didn't want to tell my older Aunt, I was scared that she would be upset with me. I became so used to it such that whenever she called I would willingly go. Sometimes we would first have breakfast, finish all the work at home, then go to her bedroom and have sex. This continued until I was 16 when she got married". Table 2 shows that 5.7% girls said they were abused by their father, 9.4% girls by their step father, 28.6% boys by their step mother, 20.8% girls and 28.6% boys said by their uncle, 20.8% girls by a male relative, 13.2% girls and 14.3% boys by a neighbor, 9.4% girls by a male family friend, 5.7% girls by a stranger, 15.2% girls and 28.6% boys were abused by others.

One 14 years old narrated how this good relationship impacted on her disclosure: "I was so scared, he said he would kill me. So I kept on crying even when my mother came back. She asked why I was crying and I didn't say anything. But because of the good relationship which we had with our neighbor, she went and called the same uncle who had defiled me to come and ask me why I was crying and could not stop. And he came to ask me. I felt so confused that he was even asking me to just say why I was crying, but I still did not say anything". A male parent describes the relationship he enjoyed with his child's abuser: "The gentleman is a well-known person, he is like a relative. He stays in our neighborhood and we go to the same church. He could visit us often. We never knew that all the visits were just a way to get to my child. Maybe he got used to coming home, so he knew that it wouldn't be easy for me to know that he is after my girl. Because I was so close to this man, it was difficult for her to tell me".

## DISCUSSION

The results revealed that more than half of the children who were abused came from families where their parents or guardians were working. The only reason which the researcher

could come up with that conclusion was these children were vulnerable to sexual violence because their perpetrators may have been taking advantage of their primary caregivers' absence to find time to molest their children. Another reason for this could be that, children who come from working families are the ones whose families frequently see the need to use facilities at YWCA when they are sexually abused. Previous research (reviewed in this study), had not looked at parent's employment status and its connection with child sexual abuse. The study revealed that 88.3% of the participants had someone touch their breasts, vagina or bottom over their clothes, 83.3% had experienced kissing on their mouth, and 88.3% said they had someone expose sexual parts to them, 93.3% had experienced vaginal abuse, 26.7% had experienced anal sex and 35% experienced oral sex. These results are different from Akani *et al.* (2015), who found penile penetration to be 69%, kissing 37%, oral sex 3.6% and touching 44.8%. This difference is mainly attributed to the sample selection employed in this study. While their age group ranged from 4 to 15 years, this study included boys and girls from the age of 8 to 18 years. Since children who are older tend to experience more penile penetration than those who are younger, the fact that participants who were 16-18 were included in this study could explain the discrepancy in the findings.

The study also revealed that 6.7% (1.9% girls and 42.9% boys) of the participants were abused by a woman, 70% (73.4% girls and 42.9% boys) by a man, and 24% (24.5% girls and 14.3%) by a boy. During the interview two boys reported having being abused by their Aunties who were women. This is different from the findings of Akani *et al.* (2015), who found all the abusers in his study to be males. This difference may be attributed to the low number of boys who were recruited in their study. Out of 192 participants in their study, only 3 were boys compared to 10 boys who participated in this study. This may have impacted on the results in the sense that boys are more likely to be abused by a female than a female being abused by a fellow female. This study like Akani's also revealed that most of the perpetrators of sexual abuse are males. Regarding duration of abuse, the study revealed that 39.5% girls of the participants experienced abuse which lasted for day/s, 13.2% girls and 42.9% boys said it lasted for weeks, 34% girls and 42.9% boys said it lasted for months and 13.2% girls and 14.3% boys said it lasted for years. Something which was noted is the fact that no boy reported having experienced abuse lasting for a day. The implication being that abuse in boys generally tend to last longer than abuse in girls. The Washington Post (2001), revealed that compared to males, females are typically more comfortable with help-seeking. This information relates well with Holmes *et al.* (1997) who argued that being placed in the role of victim and accepting and disclosing abuse are often extremely problematic for men, as the rape experience undermines their concept of masculinity. Societies view therefore of what is appropriate behavior for boys makes it difficult for boys to disclose sexual abuse and this may help explain why abuse for boys generally lasts longer than that of girls. This study also confirms other studies that show a link between disclosure of abuse and duration of abuse following the fact that majority (both boys and girls) were abused for a period which lasted from weeks to years. Smith (2000), found that there was a link between severity of abuse, which in this case relates to duration of abuse, and disclosure of abuse. He observed that a series rather than a single episode of rape was associated with delayed disclosure. The duration of

abuse in this case had an impact on self-disclosure of abuse among boys and girls in the study. When the participants were asked who they blame for the abuse, the findings of the study revealed that 56.7% (58.5% girls and 42.9% boys) blamed the offender, 20% (18.9% girls and 28.6% boys) blamed themselves, 15% (15.1% of the girls and 14.3% boys) said they blamed nobody, 6.7% (5.7% girls and 14.3% boys) blamed their mother. When asked about their feelings towards the perpetrator 66% (66.7% of the girls and 71.4% boys) said they hated the person who abused them, 21.7% (22.6% girls and 14.3% boys) said they were confused about how they felt and 10% (9.4% girls and 14.3% boys) said they had no feeling towards the person who abused them. It has been shown that survivors frequently take personal responsibility for the abuse, for instance, UNICEF (2003), found that one of the reasons why the victims did not disclose sexual abuse was fear that the child himself or herself would be considered and be held responsible for the abuse. Hence, the fact that most of the participants in this study blamed the offender was a positive sign. But it was worrying that quite a significant number blamed nobody (15%) and others blamed themselves (20%) while 21.7% were confused about how they felt towards the perpetrator. This seemed to show that when the sexual abuse was done by an esteemed trusted adult, it was hard for the victims to view the perpetrator in a negative light, thus leaving them incapable of seeing what happened as not their fault. Regarding self-blame, Leonard (1996), in his Social Exchange theory argued that, in order to reduce the distress, an individual can restore psychological equity and this psychological equity is achieved by distorting reality in order to convince themselves that the treatment they are receiving is deserved. This inability to see the offender as the one who is entirely at fault has an impact on disclosure of abuse.

## Conclusion

Child sexual abuse has been found to be a global issue that affects both the male and female sex. However, the study found that there are gender differentials in the nature and experiences of sexually abused victims. Despite purely focusing on adolescents, the study found that the highest form of sexual abuse was vaginal penetration followed by touching of the breasts, vaginal and 'bottom' over clothes, and the perpetrator showing their body parts particularly the penis or vaginal to the respondents. Nonetheless, experiences of anal and oral sex were found to be the least form of sexual abuse conducted on children in the study. Moreover, males were found to be the most dominant sexual perpetrators in this study as compared to females. It was also found that male perpetrators were most likely to abuse children of the same sex as compared to female perpetrators. Furthermore, as regards to the children, despite girls being the most abused sex, it was discovered that boys were found to have experienced abuse on a longer duration as compared to girls. One of the reasons discovered was the fact that females naturally are comfortable with help-seeking as compared to boys who would shun from receiving help for fear of their masculinity being questioned. As a result, boys would experience sexual abuse the longest. This was also one of the reasons as to why the study found girls to be earlier disclosers than boys. Based on the above findings therefore, it is essential that parents, guardians and caregivers have consistent talks with children in their households on child sexual abuse and disclosure. It is important for them to reduce the perceptions and norms imposed on males and females, particularly on males and the issue of masculinity; as well as the myths that

perpetrators would tell children on sex. Aside from that, it is recommendable for various institutions and organizations especially those that are child based, to bring out strategies for all children, not only a particular group or area, to be sensitized on child sexual abuse and how they can protect themselves from an early age. This can be done in schools through activities, motivation talks and lessons as well as holding free based activities in communities that would attract and make children feel comfortable to access such information. Other than children, it is essential for parents, guardians and caregivers and the community at large to be frequently sensitized on issues pertaining to child sexual abuse, how they can protect and create awareness in their children respective of their ages and what to do when they have been abused.

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