

**THE ROLE OF MACRO-SYSTEMIC CONTEXTS IN UNDERSTANDING THE AETIOLOGY  
AND EPIDEMIOLOGY OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has become a serious social and public health concern locally and globally. This presentation discusses the role of macro-systemic contexts, both by omission and/or commission, in understanding the aetiology and epidemiology of CSA in southern Africa. CSA is a social vice that threatens to frustrate development efforts in the region due to its known deleterious consequences on the survivors, the very people in whom the destiny of the region lies. Focus is on five selected broad contexts which include the polity, mass media, laws on CSA, economic conditions (e.g. unemployment, poverty and overcrowding) and culture (e.g. patriarchy, male dominance and male violence, gender socialisation, and child rearing practices). An understanding of the role of macrosystemic contexts in the aetiology and epidemiology of CSA can provide a baseline for both the formulation and implementation of effective prevention and intervention strategies. This, it is argued, will go a long way in capacitating future generations to meet their numerous needs, which is the essence of sustainable development.

**Key words:** Child sexual abuse; macrosystemic contexts; aetiology; epidemiology; southern Africa

**INTRODUCTION**

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a social and public health concern worldwide (Pinheiro, 2006; USAID, 2008; WHO, 2004; Zink, Klesges, Stevens, & Decker, 2009) because it is associated with numerous and serious short- and long-term 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). In addition, CSA is a violation of the rights of the child as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (OAU Doc.CAB/LEG/24.9/49, 1990). Research shows that no society is immune to CSA (Fergusson & Mullen, 1999; Finkelhor, 1994; WHO, 2002). For instance, Finkelhor (1994) found that research studies in 19 countries produced findings similar to North American research, with prevalence ranging from 7 to 36 % for women and 3 to 29 % for men. On the other hand, WHO estimates that 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 years experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence during 2002. It is clear from the above studies that CSA is a serious issue.

Research shows that CSA is prevalent in southern Africa (African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) (2008); Anderson & Ho-Foster, 2008; Jewkes, Penn-Kekana, Rose-Junius & Malala, 2004; Makoni, 2006; Reza et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2008). For instance, in a national study which they conducted in South Africa, Anderson and Ho-Foster (2008) reported that sexual abuse of school boys was more common in rural areas while female perpetration was more an urban phenomenon. Jewkes et al. (2004) found that child rape was a serious problem in Namibia. In a national study that was conducted with females in Swaziland, Reza et al. (2009) found that 33.2 % of the respondents reported an incident of sexual violence before they reached 18 years of age. In Botswana, some 67 per cent of school girls surveyed had been sexually harassed by their teachers (ACPF, 2008). According to Makoni (2006) in 2005 only, 6 000 girls were sexually abused in Zimbabwe. In a recent study that was conducted in Zimbabwe, UNICEF (2008) reported that the number of rape cases involving minors reported to police surged from 2 192 in 2003 to 3 112 in 2006. The above findings unequivocally show that CSA is a serious problem in southern Africa. As Jewkes, Penn-Kekana and Rose-Junius (2005) argue, the magnitude of the problem suggests that there are important aspects of society that, if not legitimating, at least provide space for these activities.

This presentation assumes that widespread sexual abuse of children in southern Africa fundamentally becomes possible because of a series of broad societal factors hereby referred to as ‘macrosystemic contexts’ that make children vulnerable through creating opportunities for abuse. However, no single factor can be held responsible for the perpetration of CSA but that they intersect with other risk factors for perpetration of abuse including those related to individual psychology (Jekwes et al., 2005) to create

conditions of risk, with different factors being more or less relevant in different situations. This paper explores aspects of the macrosystemic contexts of CSA by drawing on findings from research conducted in the region. The main objective is to show how macrosystemic contexts link with the aetiology and epidemiology of CSA.

The term ‘macrosystemic contexts’ presupposes the existence of other systemic contexts at different levels of analysis. In this presentation the concepts ‘macrosystemic contexts’ and ‘macrosystems’ are used interchangeably. Macrosystemic contexts are part of Bronfenbrenner’s (1989) ecological systems theory which looks at how five nested environmental systems interact with each other and the individual to influence development. The other four systems are the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and chronosystems.

The macrosystem may be considered the outermost layer in the child’s environment (Berk, 2000). It consists of cultural values, customs and laws, and economic contexts such as poverty, unemployment and overcrowding (Berk, 2000; Townsend & Dawes, 2004). In the opinion of Bronfenbrenner (1989), the macrosystem may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture. What happens in the macrosystem has a cascading influence throughout the interactions of all other systems (Berk, 2000). This is one of the reasons why this presentation focuses on macrosystems and not the other systems.

Furthermore, the rationale for focusing on macrosystems is that most research that has investigated the causation of CSA, especially in developed countries, has tended to focus on intra- and interpersonal factors without paying due attention to the role of broad societal factors (Whitaker et al., 2008). On the other hand, social-ecological models of risk behaviours (Jessor & Jessor, 1977) and child abuse (Belsky, 1993) suggest that behaviour is a function of individual, family, peer, and broader social-level influences. In this regard, macrosystemic contexts help locate incidents of abuse in specific socio-cultural contexts.

The following section discusses how the different macrosystemic contexts cast light on the aetiology and epidemiology of CSA in southern Africa. These include the mass media, laws, cultural practices, polity and ideology and the socio-economic conditions. There is a deliberate effort to show how macrosystems can promote the prevalence of the problem through commission and omission.

### **Political stability/System of government**

Macrosystemic contexts include the country's ideology (such as democracy, authoritarianism etc.) and political struggles. In virtually every known society, the main function of the polity is goal formulation and attainment (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004). It is the polity which drives a country. In societies where the major issues are the effects of war, political struggles or corruption, it is not surprising that the individual rights of the child in terms of sexual integrity are neglected (Lachman, 2004). The colonial legacy is especially important in this regard. For instance, South Africa is a case in point where the struggle for independence has created an environment conducive for the perpetration of CSA. According to Phasha (2007), the country's violent past has contributed greatly towards the increasing number of acts of sexual violence against children. The previous apartheid government's efforts to maintain political power were coercive and violent, and so were the opposition's strategies to bring about justice and social change (Simpson, 1993). These made violence an everyday experience in most people's lives. As people became accustomed to using violence for political reasons, it became easier for them, typically men, to use similar measures in personal relationships (Russell, 1995). This rendered the weaker members of the society, namely children, vulnerable to sexual violence.

In Zimbabwe, the political crisis that has been unfolding for close to a decade has exposed children to sexual exploitation in many ways. For instance, the political crisis has led to an economic meltdown in the country, forcing children especially girls, to engage in survival sex as way of augmenting the supply of basic needs (Thomson, 2009). How much sexual violence children in Zimbabwe have been subjected to as political violence often reared its head, remains unknown. Research shows that whenever there is political conflict, women and girl children are especially used as human shields (Lachman, 2004). More often than not, they are subjected to sexual violence.

### **Mass media**

The mass media can contribute to our understanding of the nature and extent of CSA in southern Africa. For instance, CSA continues to receive attention in the mass media in the region (Chiroro et al., 2006; Townsend & Dawes, 2004). Reports often suggest that the problem is increasing. However, it is difficult to know whether there has been a real increase in sexual abuse, or whether reporting rates have increased as a result of heightened levels of awareness. According to Jewkes (2004) CSA is not a new

phenomenon, but one which has risen in prominence over the last few years particularly in the wake of media publicity surrounding the rape of very young children. In the same vein, Mathoma et al. (2006) reported that in a study which they conducted in Botswana and Swaziland, all the respondents indicated that their main source of knowledge about CSA was the media (i.e. newspapers, radio and television). Still, on a positive note, the media can even encourage survivors to report abuse by explaining how it can be done, supporting the rights of the survivor by assuring and ascertaining that abuse was a violation of their rights and that justice must prevail. The media can also query delays in court proceedings, discuss how cases are being handled by the courts. It can also create a forum for discussing cultural practices that promote the sexual exploitation of children. By and large, the media can help create an atmosphere in which survivors can feel empowered to disclose abuse which is important in determining the magnitude of the problem.

On the other hand, the media can have a negative influence on our quest to understand the nature and extent of CSA. For instance, accessible pornography and sexual violence on television can increase attacks on children. Referring to the situation in South Africa, van Niekerk (2006) argues that the media constantly reinforce a message that sexual expression should be free and unfettered by values, faithfulness and self-control. In addition, the way an incident is reported is important. For instance, it must be done in a way that does not dramatise and further traumatise the survivor and his or her family (Bird & Spur, 2004). Should this happen, survivors will not be free to disclose abuse, contributing to under-reporting and to our failure in getting an accurate understanding of the epidemiology of the problem.

The media can also assume a neutral role by not giving reported cases space. For instance, reported cases may appear at the bottom of a newspaper page or in some columns where they may not be readily accessible to the readers. For example, the case of Baby Tshepang, a nine month old girl who was raped at her home in Upington South Africa, on 26 October 2001, was initially afforded minimal space in the press (Bird & Spur, 2004). It occupied a few matter of fact paragraphs at the bottom of a newspaper page. The case received publicity following one woman's e-mail campaign and the fury of gender activists (Bird & Spur, 2004). All in all, the media has a powerful role in helping us understand the aetiology and epidemiology of CSA.

## **Socio-Economic Conditions**

The economic contexts referred to at the macrosystemic level include unemployment, poverty and overcrowding. Research findings on the impact of socio-economic conditions on CSA are contradictory. For instance, while some findings suggest that CSA knows no social boundaries (Bird & Spurr, 2004; Mathoma et al., 2006), others suggest that socio-economic factors such as unemployment, poverty and overcrowding may well increase vulnerability (African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN), 2007; Lachman, 2004; UNICEF, 2008). For instance, unemployment may be a risk factor since it creates more time for abusers to approach and sexually abuse children (Townsend & Dawes, 2004). This finding has far reaching implications for the region where unemployment has reached phenomenal proportions.

CSA has been reported to be prevalent in poverty stricken societies (ANPPCAN, 2007; Lachman, 2004). In southern Africa, this finding has been corroborated by research in Botswana and Swaziland (Mathoma et al., 2006), South Africa (Madu & Peltzer, 2000; Van Niekerk, 2006), Tanzania (McCran et al., 2006) and Zimbabwe (Thomson, 2009; UNICEF, 2008). For instance, in a study involving university students in Tanzania, McCran et al. (2006) found that poverty was one of the primary explanations given for childhood sexual abuse. In a study that they carried out using secondary school students in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, Madu and Peltzer (2000) reported a very high prevalence rate of 54 % which they attributed to absent parents and poverty. The authors maintain that in this province, many parents work as migrant labourers, and as result, many children are left either alone at home during the weekdays after school or with nannies and grandparents, who may not give them proper care. Thus, they are vulnerable to sexual abuse from opportunistic predators (Madu & Peltzer, 2000). In yet another study that was carried out in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, van Niekerk (2006) reported that many children support their families, pay their school fees, and have their uniforms and books supplied by means of sexual favours. In a study that was conducted in Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, Thomson (2009) reported that due to poverty, school girls sell their bodies for as little as a packet of biscuits. In the same vein, Corsaro (2005) argues that poverty clearly steals the childhoods and often the very lives of many children in the developing world as it propels them into dangerous adult territory, both as inhabitants of the street and as economically productive actors. This is further supported by Mulinge (2010, p.12) who says “Economic needs consequent from poverty also increase

children's vulnerability to forced early marriage and commercial sexual exploitation through child prostitution".

Poor economic conditions have a negative impact on parental monitoring and supervision of children (Townsend & Dawes, 2004). For instance, under harsh economic conditions, parents may leave their children alone for long periods as they attempt to secure income for the family, usually away from home. In southern Africa, South Africa has become a destination to huge numbers of people from its neighbours. The situation has been particularly worse in Zimbabwe where millions of people have emigrated into the Diaspora, with three million believed to be in South Africa (Coltart, 2008). This kind of movement exposes children who are left behind to sexual exploitation by neighbours and relatives (May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005).

Another structural feature of poverty that is associated with CSA is overcrowding (Dawes, 2002). Overcrowding limits the possibility of separation between sexualised adults or teenagers and children. This creates an environment that promotes intra-familial sexual abuse. In areas where overcrowding is extreme, co-sleeping may be common, thereby increasing opportunities for extra-familial sexual abuse. This is a very serious issue given that the shortage of housing is a perennial problem in southern Africa where huge numbers of people live in squatter camps. In Zimbabwe the problem was compounded by Operation Murambatsvina (Operation Clean Up), a government initiative that was implemented in May 2005 to get rid of illegal structures especially in urban areas (Shale, 2006).

### **Laws on CSA**

Laws are the bricks and mortar of all efforts aimed at the realisation of child rights (ACPF, 2008). In this regard, it is important to note that the region has made significant legal achievements as shown by the harmonisation of national laws in most countries with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. With increased realisation of the widespread assault on young children, especially girls, governments in the region have made attempts to curb the trend through various sexual offences acts.

In spite of these achievements, CSA remains a serious issue in the region. Various reasons have been given to account for the status quo. At the forefront are non-existent or weak enforcement mechanisms

(ACPF, 2008; ANPPCAN, 2007; *Beyond Inequalities*, 2008). As Mindzie (2007) opines, African governments must prove their commitment to child rights beyond the mere multiplication of instruments and mechanisms. In the same vein, van Niekerk (2006) argues that the lack of or inadequate service delivery (especially of legal services) from all sectors communicates to sex offenders that they can continue to abuse with impunity, and to families and children that they will not be protected. This further increases the underreporting of CSA cases making it extremely difficult to determine the magnitude of the problem in the region. As ACPF (2008) has noted, wealth and high levels of development can and do help, but the crucial determinant of child wellbeing is not so much the wealth of societies and nations, but the presence of political will and the commitments of governments. While our governments should be commended for harmonising national laws with international laws such as CRC, this should only be seen as a step towards the ultimate goal which is to eradicate CSA. It does not serve our children much to be taught in schools that our countries have ratified international conventions while they remain vulnerable to the perpetration of sexual abuse. The adoption of these conventions should be followed by concrete action to address sexual violence against children.

Another important issue concerning the courts that has been raised in the region are the cumbersome procedures in handling cases involving CSA (*Beyond Inequalities*, 2008; Farhana, 2005; Shumba, 2006; Walker & Louw, 2005). For instance, Shumba (2006) noted that the processing of cases involving CSA is so long that information may end up being forgotten or mixed up by the survivors. The child and his or her family are made to wait without adequate explanation or indication as to when their matter will be called. This creates confusion and anxiety around the functioning of the court and the trial process (Shumba, 2006). As such, this could be one of the contributing factors in some of the cases being thrown out of the courts or withdrawn by a survivor after being persuaded to do so by the perpetrator. In the same vein, Farhana (2005) reported that due to the delays, sometimes the family is often coerced to withdraw the case from the courts and use customary means in settling the matter. In addition, perpetrators often negotiate out of court settlements with parents, leaving the survivors with no recourse. Thus, the way cases are handled can discourage people from reporting their cases.

The proliferation of cases of CSA in the region is ample evidence that current laws have failed to offer children protection because they seem to be more lenient to the perpetrator hence making children more vulnerable to sexual abuse (Shumba, 2006). According to ANPPCAN (2007), in some cases the



legislative systems are defective and plagued by corruption. As Mulinge (2010) avers, in many countries, governments either lack the political will or are simply unable to address the problem of corruption. In the same vein, Bird and Spur (2004) argue that people are not satisfied with sentences given to rapists as evidenced by their clamouring for stiffer sentences such as death penalty and life imprisonment. For example, in Zimbabwe if found guilty of rape, the perpetrator faces a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison (applies to survivors below 12 years) while the maximum sentence for statutory rape is 5 years in prison (survivor 12-16 years) (Sexual Offences Act, 2001). These sentences may not be deterrent given that the survivor might have contracted HIV/AIDS virus. Although decisions on sentences such as life imprisonment and the death penalty are enshrined in the constitutions of the respective countries, the view that members of society consider current sentences as not being deterrent enough appears to be well substantiated. Thus, the prevalence of CSA in the region may be attributed to the view that perpetrators perceive existing laws to be flawed and not deterrent.

## **CULTURAL PRACTICES**

At the macrosystemic level, socio-cultural contexts include issues such as patriarchy, male dominance and male violence, and gender socialisation and child rearing practices. Feminists argue that unequal and power relations endemic in patriarchal society, which are maintained by socialisation processes, go a long way toward explaining why men sexually abuse both women and children (Townsend & Dawes, 2004). Feminists have also noted the influence of socialisation and child-rearing practices that may play a role in CSA. For example, throughout southern Africa, children are brought up to trust unquestioningly and obey their parents and other adult authority figures such as teachers, religious leaders, and aid workers (ANPPCAN, 2007; Guma & Henda, 2004; Jekwes et al., 2005). As Guma and Henda (2004) argue, the issue of being loyal to one's elders and showing respect by doing as one is told can have both positive and negative effects on children. This may make it easier for the adult to attract and then abuse the unsuspecting child. In the same vein Lalor (2004) argues that the emphasis on children's obedience to adults and male supremacy over females allows men to yield a double authority over girls. In addition, Kaboberi-Macharia (1998) believes that incest is facilitated in southern Africa as a result of socialisation pressures to respect parents and elders. Armstrong (1998), too, suggests that the African child's socialisation of obedience to elders heightens vulnerability to sexual abuse. Due to this kind of socialisation, children find it difficult to question the behaviour of elders and their authority in particular

circumstances. In addition, abused children may not speak against their abusers as this may be taken as a sign of disrespect.

The way that children in the region are socialised exposes them to various cultural practices which are symptomatic of sexual abuse. For example, a problem commonly found in many parts of southern Africa is the phenomenon of early marriage (ACPF, 2008; Beyond Inequalities, 2008; Muronda, 2005). In most cases a girl child is married at a very early age because of traditional beliefs and practices (Rembe & Odeku, 2009). In other countries young girls are married early to settle family debts and as compensation for pledging (Malawi Human Rights Commission, 2004; UNICEF, 2003). This practice is prevalent in Malawi and Zimbabwe (Rembe & Odeku, 2009). In some countries, child marriages are often promoted by defective legal systems. For instance, in Zimbabwe where both the traditional law and the Roman Dutch Law co-exist, the former law allows marriage to girls of 12 years (Muronda, 2005). Although the consent of the girl is required before the marriage is conceptualised, the girl children are still too young to marry and also too young to give an informed consent.

Other customary practices and norms such as the abduction of a girl for marriage also encourage CSA to occur. Wood (2005) noted that acts such as abduction of a girl for marriage still persist in some rural communities in South Africa. The practice involves the snatching of a girl by a group of men, including the one who intends to marry her. The girl will then be forced to have sex with man who intends to marry her. This form of abuse is not considered as a sex crime even if it happened without the consent of a girl (Wood, 2005). It is accepted by the community, hence it is not reported to the police.

Another harmful cultural practice that promotes the perpetration of CSA in the region is betrothment (Muronda, 2005). This is when a young girl is forced into marrying an elderly man (usually rich), by her parents and family. This is usually done to save the family from hunger or severe economic hardships. In addition, in most parts of the region, husbands often engage in play with their sisters in law. This is a practice in which a brother in law can indecently assault his young and unmarried sister in law under the guise of culture. This practice is meant to teach young girls how a man proposes love and how to avoid him. The girl would also learn how to look after a husband, as she will be doing it for the brother in law. Many girls have been sexually abused as a result, but most of these offences have gone unreported. For

instance, in a study involving high school girls and college students in Zimbabwe, Chiroro et al. (2006) found that most participants were sexually abused by their brothers in law.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The concept of sustainable development gained prominence as a result of the 1987 Brundtland report, titled 'Our Common Future' (McMichael, 2008). The report defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. However, how this can be accomplished still remains a puzzle. The major tenet of this presentation is that CSA heavily compromises the ability of children to meet their own needs. In this regard, extant literature is unequivocal on the short- and long-term deleterious consequences of CSA. These include 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). It can therefore be argued that CSA does create a hostile environment for children to meet their own needs. The role that children in southern Africa can play in promoting sustainable development is being hamstrung by the prevalence of CSA, which is a violation of their rights as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (OAU Doc.CAB/LEG/24.9/49, 1990).

## **CONCLUSION**

The main purpose of this presentation was to show how macrosystemic contexts can help our understanding of the aetiology and epidemiology of CSA in southern Africa. There are indeed commonalities in the nature and epidemiology of the problem in the region. For instance, it is associated with poor socio-economic conditions and lack of implementation and/or enforcement of laws. Also, the gendered nature of the violation is pervasive in the region where patriarchy is firmly entrenched. CSA has far reaching implications for sustainable development in the region. Overall, it is responsible for eroding the capacity of many children to participate in society in the future, and for inhibiting the full realisation of their potential. However, the problem cannot be adequately dealt with without determining its aetiology and epidemiology. This presentation buttresses the inclusion of macro-systemic contexts in understanding the problem of CSA as well as in formulating means of fighting it.

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