

Understanding Factors That Hinder Child Abuse Cases from Being Reported to Officials in Households with Alcoholic Parents: Case Study of Mashonaland West, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Background: This article discusses reasons why child abuse victims and witness may not disclose child maltreatment. **Methods:** For primary data collection of this article, a sample of church pastors, community members and social workers from Mashonaland West in Zimbabwe were interviewed. Primary data from a qualitative research methodology was used to explore why child abuse victims and witnesses do not always report child abuse when they come across it. **Aim:** The purpose for this article is to promote awareness of what hinders people from reporting child abuse so that childcare professionals and families can work together in removing barriers that hinders the revelation of horrid secret such as child abuse. **Results:** Inefficient systems for reporting child abuse can hinder victims and witness from disclosing child abuse cases. **Conclusion:** To prevent and reduce child abuse, there is a need to have effective procedures of protecting and encouraging child abuse victims and witnesses to disclose suspected child abuse cases.

Keywords

Child Abuse, Child Abuse Witness, Child Abuse Victims, Child Abuse Disclosure

1. Introduction

Child abuse has been known to go on for a long period of time before it is reported. In some cases, children have been known to have lost their lives in the hands of perpetrators due to known but unreported child abuse cases (Fitzpatrick

et al., 2020). This article explores why child abuse and witnesses fail to report suspected child abuse cases. A well-documented studies of the death of Victoria Climbié (Dean, 2019), a child from Nigeria who died at the hands of her uncle in London, United Kingdom (UK) and that of Baby P, who also died due to abuse by his mother and her boyfriend (Davidson & Bifulo, 2018). In both cases, the early signs of child abuse were known by either some family members, neighbours or professionals. However, when these cases were reported, it was too late. Multiple studies agree that when child abuse is reported when it is first suspected, it can save a child's life, prevent further abuse and bring perpetrator to justice (Mutanana & Gasva, 2015; Davidson & Bifulo, 2018; Makura, 2009). Using secondary data and primary data carried out by the author, this article explores what hinders maltreated children and witnesses from disclosing child abuse.

Individuals or professionals who witnesses or suspect child abuse are not always keen to disclose or report it in fear of being victimised themselves. As stated by Pearce (2013), there is scope for better early identification and prevention when the community is empowered feel safe to disclose child abuse without fear of being attacked by perpetrators.

In cases where children and parents did not receive Safeguarding training, the victims did not know who to tell. However, in developed countries, children are educated about personal safety. These training include stranger danger or Appropriate and inappropriate relationships. They also learn about organizations to report unhealthy relationships or child abuse to. For instance, Child line in United Kingdom 0800 1111 is the number children learn from a very early age (Niccols et al., 2011). Unfortunately, this privilege is not readily available to children in poorer countries where educational resources are limited (Pipe et al., 2013).

Reviewed literatures agree that despite the ugliness and cruelties of the act of child abuse, children may not feel encouraged to report child abuse. The literature reviewed concluded that the reasons below have discouraged children from disclosing child abuse (Pipe et al., 2013).

2. Why Children and Witnesses May Not Disclose Child Abuse

2.1. Victims Not Knowing What to Say

Although victims may know what is happening to them is wrong, they may struggle to describe it. For younger children, they may not how to describe the abuse because of their stage of language development may be a barrier that will hold them from wanting to report the abuse (Waters, 2016). For example, Language Barrier for children who might have immigrated from other countries or districts may not speak the local language. This may discourage a child to report maltreatment.

2.2. Fear of the Consequences after Disclosure

Despite the seriousness of child abuse, the victims fear that they may be accused

of lying when they report (Faller, 2019). It may well be that the abuser could tell the victim that they no one will believe them. In cases where the perpetrator is in powerful positions in the society they live in, the abused child might think that their allegation will not be taken seriously. They might not know what the law says the law about child abuse and the abuse of trust (Brennan & McEvane, 2020).

2.3. Confusion, Thinking It Was Normal

Very young children who are still learning about the role of the parent or guardian might not know that it includes providing protection to the child and meeting the child's basic needs of adults and what is acceptable behaviour (Blakey et al., 2021). It is this enlightenment that will cause the child to accept abusive behaviour as normal. Children look up to their parents and when the parents may accept the maltreatment because they look up to their parents as life coaches and mentors. It is not always clear to the child that the parents will be abusing them (Chan et al., 2013).

2.4. Feeling Unclean or Blaming Themselves

When a child has been sexually abused, they may feel unclean and fear that when they inform others, the community or close family may shun them and look at them as unclean (Rhodes et al., 2019). In some cases, children will grow with this stigma and may start to believe that no one will like them because their purity was tarnished by abuse. Some societies refer abused children as damaged goods. It is the fear of being the society labelling them unclean that may hinder them children from disclosing that they have been abused (Waters, 2016).

2.5. Fears about Other People's Reaction

Fear of the unknown may also discourage children from reporting abuse. Children may be worried that when they report abuse the person they may react with rage and seek revenge, depressed because they feel they have failed to protect the child (Lahtinen, 2022). They may blame the child. In cases where the perpetrator threatens the victim claiming they will commit suicide if they tell, the child may not report because they might fear they may harm themselves. Fear of being removed from their family by the social welfare may also prevent the child from reporting Child abuse (Yurteri et al., 2021).

This concludes that there is a need to protect the victims of abuse so that they may confidently report cases of abuse without fear or victimisation by the society. It also confirms that every child abused case reported requires to be taken seriously to build or restore confidence in the present and future victims (Everson & Faller, 2019).

3. Tried and Tested Reporting Systems

Due to the above reasons, and the mishandling of child abuse cases the Integrated services, Early Intervention and Safeguarding partnership in UK Includ-

ing Northern Ireland identified the need for effective communication between strong referral systems between organisations that work with children, the development of Safeguarding training annually for all the stakeholders that work with children and young people, education for identifying, disclosing and protecting the victims of abuse (Easton, 2019).

This inter-agency partnership in Northern Ireland consists of the leadership of all statutory agencies concerned with children's lives, collaborated between 2011 and 2014 and came up with the ten-year plan for children and youth (Matthew, 2019). The strategy for the youth set out secure systems for improvements in children and young people's outcomes over ten years. The first outcome was Early Intervention:

- For the Early Years of the child.
- Sporting Early Stage of difficulty or abuse
- And a whole society approach to early intervention through ensuring the network of supports and services being available and applicable to meet children's rights, needs and ownership to solutions when outcomes are achieved.

With the education on how to identify and knowing how to report the abuse, empowers children and the victims of abuse to disclose abuse and feel face after reporting the child abuse (Smith et al., 2015). Hence the decrease in the number of child abuse cases that are caused by parental substance misuse, in Northern Ireland.

Whistleblowing and Child Abuse Disclosure

Safe Whistleblowing policy is a procedure that is in place to protect people who disclose malpractice such as child abuse (Doek, Krappmann, & Lee, 2020).

Although whistleblowing has been welcomed by employees when it was introduced in UK, researchers have concluded that some employers (were reluctant to embrace it because of its implications such as having the senior management's names tarnished. There is also a possibility of having the organisation a bad reputation. Employees felt they were given a privilege to have their voices heard unlike before when crimes committed by employers were not always reported and doing so was taking a huge risky because employee felt the perpetrator could seek revenge, they could lose their jobs or get victimised by their superiors or other colleagues (Marshall, 2014). Employees felt their rights to speak up were protected when laws are violated. In 2014 Child in Northern Ireland UK, whistle blowing has been identified as one of the greatest contributors to child abuse disclosure. Once they were sure that their rights to whistle were protected, they felt empowered to report any child abuse committed by their colleagues or their colleague's failure to act with due diligence competency in reporting cases of suspected child abuse (Halpin & Dundon, 2017).

Because of the shame and sensitivity associated with child abuse committed by a child's own parents, reviewed literature is in agreement that professionals may be reluctant to report parents or take appropriate action or not report suspected

child abuse. Possibly, they may be related or have a personal relationship with the parents. Whistle blowing empowers other staff members to report their colleague's for perverting the court of justice by failure to observe the law in safeguarding children (Cho & Jackson, 2016). Although whistle blowing may cause unnecessary stress to both the employee and fellow workers, it is a huge improvement to that have brought a significant reassurance and protection such that employees can no longer turn a blind eye to crime committed against children's rights and those of the vulnerable individuals in the countries were whistle blowing procedure if competently practiced (Franke, 2014). Despite protecting children's rights being everybody's business, a moral responsibility and a child's right to be protected, Professionals have not found it easy to report malpractice associated with reporting child abuse. This statement concludes that whistle blowing promotes child abuse disclosures and speeds up referral systems because it deters professionals from breaking the laws or failing to act as required of them by the rule of law in fear of being reported by their colleagues (Kaptein, 2022).

4. Methodology

One of the important variables to this study was to interrogate the effectiveness of the institutional structures for dealing with child abused caused by parental substance misuse from participants perspective. The Primary results for this theme was responded to by adults, church pastors and social workers in Zimbabwe. The researcher will also discuss tried and tested methods for dealing with child abuse in developed countries and compare them with procedures that are in place if any in Mashonaland West Zimbabwe. This will form basis which will be used on the recommendation section of this study.

5. Findings

Below are findings and discussion from primary data collected by the author.

The primary data in this section are the participants' response to what systems are available in Zimbabwe to deal with child abuse, including child abuse that may be caused by Parental substance misuse. In the primary data presented below, 16 interviewees responded to this part of the question. A word cloud of their verbatim responses was extracted (Figure 1). 3 key themes that emerged from their verbatim responses included the words police, call and report. These emerging themes are discussed in detail henceforth.

The word police were mentioned by 5 respondents for 7 times. Hence, it was the most discussed theme, whose word tree is shown in Figure 2.

The word call was mentioned by 4 interviewees for 5 times. Its word tree output is shown in Figure 3.

The word report was the third most discussed theme, which was mentioned by 3 interviewees for 4 times. Figure 4 shows how the word was used in the interviewees' verbatim responses.



Figure 1. Word cloud of the respondents’ verbatim responses on what they could do if they noticed that a child was a victim of child abuse. Source: Primary data.

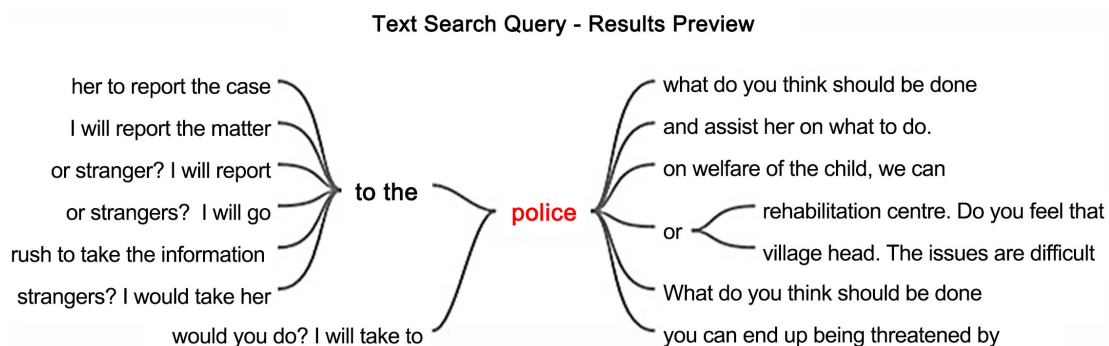


Figure 2. Word tree output for the word “police”. Source: Primary data.

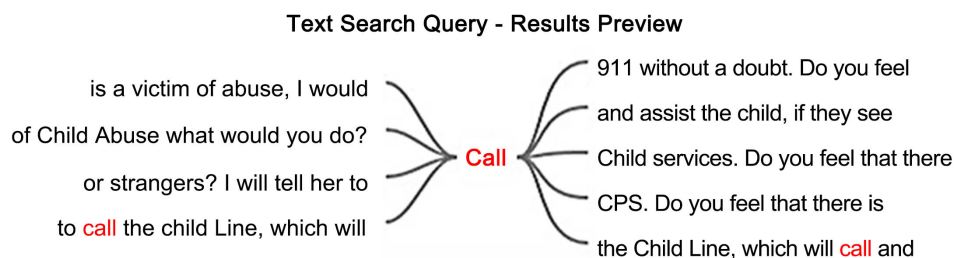


Figure 3. Word tree output for the word call. Source: Primary data.



Figure 4. Word tree output for the word child. Source: Primary data.

6. Discussion

Although the primary data findings highlight the participant’s responses to reporting suspected child abuse, it also highlights why they are not keen to report

child abuse. Below is the discussion for this theme and why participants are not keen to report child abuse cases.

In response to the strategies that are in place to deal with suspected child abuse, 75% of the respondents in Zimbabwe stated that they will call or report child abuse to the police. While 25% mentioned reporting to social welfare, report to village head, assist the child or do nothing because they will “*end up being threatened*” by the perpetrators for reporting them to police (Figure 2). Primary data from USA demonstrated a variety of Structural and agencies they can report suspected child abuse rather than just to the police. They mentioned 911, Child Line or CPS (Figures 1-4).

Receiving “*threats after reporting*” a child abuse case is a significant statement in that, it gets us to speculate that:

- The whistle-blower who reports this serious case is not protected,
- The community do not trust the current procedures of dealing with child abuse despite the seriousness the matter.
- Discourages the child abuse witnesses from disclosing child abuse in fear of threats.

Indeed, past studies have claimed that police in Zimbabwe are not always effective when dealing with child abuse cases (Mutanana et al., 2016). Even though there are limited studies to confirm this notion, one study claiming that the mainly identified source of security is compromised, is sufficient evidence to highlight a significant problem.

The main role of the Zimbabwe police officers is to enforce the law (Mugari, 2021). But how do they deal with child protection law? Multiple studies agree that part of the role of the police officer entails protecting children, their rights and that they are trained on how to deal with suspected child abuse. Past studies also claimed that Zimbabwe police officers have different departments that deal with child abuse (Chikwiri & Lemmer, 2014; Shumba, 2014; Kurebwa, 2021; Chitereka, 2010). This mostly indicates that their capability in dealing with suspected child abuse could be more effective.

However, the primary data indicates that the Structures and agencies they can report to are very limited, (*report to the police*) or they are not aware of the availability of other agencies they can go to for support or report suspected child abuse (Figure 4). Reporting to the village head was also mentioned by one participant. It is not known and concerning how much training the village head have on how to deal with sensitive issues such as child abuse. According to multiple studies on the role of the village headman, it does not state how village headman protects vulnerable groups of his village. Nor does it state what training they go through on how to deal with suspected child abuse (Chigwata, 2016). This leaves a question on their competence and effectiveness on dealing with child abuse cases. This also suggest that the witnesses and child abuse victims may not disclose suspected child abuse cases because they have no confidence in the effectiveness of current suspected abuse reporting procedures and fear they

may be subjected to abuse or victimisation by disclosing child abuse cases.

7. Conclusion

Reviewed literature and primary data analyzed in this article suggest that disclosing child abuse can be hindered by multiple reasons such as Victims not knowing what to say, fear of the consequences after disclosure, confusion, thinking it was normal, feeling unclean or blaming themselves, fears about other people's reaction or not trusting the local authority enough to deal with the matter according to the law and fear of being victimised. It is very important that child-care professionals and families know the reasons why witnesses and victims of child abuse do not come forward to report child abuse so that they can work together to educate the community about how to spot signs of abuse, safely disclosing child abuse and remove barriers that hinders safe child abuse cases disclosure.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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