



Understanding child sexual abuse in South Africa

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Child sexual abuse is conceptualised as a form of violence against children and violates children's right to being protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse, or degradation as enshrined in the Constitution, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Until recently very little was known about the national prevalence of violence against children, in particular sexual abuse. The first national estimates for the prevalence of violence against children show that sexual abuse during childhood occurs among both girl and boy children, with more girls (14.6%) experiencing sexual abuse than boys (9.9%) (Ward et al 2018).

Community population-based studies using different methods however show higher proportions (Meinck, Cluver and Boyes 2016; Seedat et al 2009; Jewkes et al 2010; Jewkes et al 2009). For instance, 39% of girls compared to 16% of boys reporting experiences of sexual abuse before the age of 18 years (Jewkes et al 2009). Crime statistics further reveal that 46.5% (24 387) of sexual assault cases reported to the police occur amongst children under the age of 18 years (SAPS 2018/2019).



The experiences of sexual violence against children occur across the lifespan of a child and into adulthood. While different forms of violence (infanticide, physical (including corporal punishment), sexual assault (including online sexual exploitation; dating violence, male on male interpersonal violence) are more prevalent at different stages of the child's development related to the child's evolving capacity.

Early childhood experiences of sexual violence, including other forms of violence can have a cumulative effect that is long-lasting and devastating during later stages of life especially at a personal and societal level.

The socio-ecological model helps to understand that violence occurs in different interconnected settings. The occurrence and co-occurrence of different experiences of violence across settings shape children's experiences of violence. The model is useful in providing an understanding of the risk and protective factors across settings and how the child's developmental stage add to their risk or protection.

Children are at increased risk to different forms of violence over time. Sexual violence can start early in the home, but the risk increases as they start school and move out of the protective home environment. Sexual violence is likely to be disclosed by children when they are able to report to someone trusted by them.

Underreporting of sexual violence among children is considered a huge problem: younger children lack the capacity to report; many children are afraid of reprisals by perpetrators, or they may feel they might not be believed, or fear being blamed and punished. Very young children lack the capacity to fully understand such acts. While fear and stigma also impact on disclosure, gendered social norms provide considerable scope for acts of sexual violence to occur with impunity.



It is estimated that physical and emotional violence cost South Africa R238.58 billion or 6 % of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015 (Fang, Fry, Ganz, et al 2016). The cost of sexual violence was only estimated for penetrative sex, at an estimated value of R 28.6 billion or 0.7% of the country's GDP (Fang,

Fry, Ganz, et al 2016). The immediate and long-term mental health impact of child sexual abuse on a survivor is multifaceted and profound. Child sexual abuse is associated with an increase in behavioural problems, sexual risk-taking behaviour, poor school outcomes, and risk for revictimization.

Violence is intergenerational, children who were exposed to violence in their early years are at increased risk of re-victimization or perpetration as they get older. Girls, in particular, are at risk of sexual assault and intimate partner violence; and these forms of violence also impact on their emotional availability as parents (Dunkle et al 2004). Research has shown that boys who experience violence are at increased risk of perpetrating rape and intimate partner violence, and of engaging in risky behaviour within the community context (Abrahams and Jewkes 2005).

It is clear that child sexual abuse has long-lasting psychological, developmental, social, and economic effects as well as intergenerational consequences the question is what can be done? We must reflect on the current approaches used to intervene and support children with experiences of sexual violence.

We should ask ourselves if these approaches are adequate and if they address the long-term impacts and whether it can break the intergenerational cycle of sexual violence against children. We should also reflect on how we can prevent the occurrence of sexual violence against children in communities. What do we need to change and how do we support the change that is needed?



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