

Identifying the Psycho-Social Support Challenges Faced by Sexually Abused Children Housed at Alpha Cottage in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study identified the psycho-social support challenges faced by sexually abused children at Alpha Cottages Children's Home in Masvingo Province Zimbabwe. The objectives were to identify the psycho-social support challenges and possible mechanisms to address the challenges. Interview and Focus Group Discussion guides were used to collect data. It can be noted that sexually abused children suffer from stigma and discrimination from other children and caregivers. There is also lack of proper medical and psycho-social care. The following recommendations came out of the research, there is need to equip caregivers with psycho-social support skills. The government needs to second a resident nurse at every children's home in Zimbabwe. Safe shelters must cater for various forms of vulnerability not to bunch them in one place.

INTRODUCTION

According to UNICEF (2017), the impact of institutionalised care for sexually abused children has a lot of psychological damage which include delayed physical growth, disability, and psychological damage which lead to increased rates of suicide and criminal activity. In America the statistics indicate/show that 26.6% of girls and 51% of boys have been abused once in their life time before reaching the age of 18, WHO (2011) These percentages suggest that more than half of the children's American population have experienced sexual abuse. It also signifies that this is a problem which has its consequences with more effects than we expect. In American Residential Care Facilities Care givers are said to be reactive rather than being proactive UNICEF (2018).

In Uganda, the statistics show that between 74%-98% of children have experienced sexual abuse before reaching the age of 18 UNICEF (2011). This shows that the issue of child sexual abuse is rampant in various parts of the world and interventions to stop the sexual abuse need to be done as soon as possible before we reach a situation of every child having experienced sexual abuse. In Africa the failure to hold perpetrator of sexual abuse accountable has made the offender to repeat the same crime till violence against children becomes and a common place UNICEF (2015). Delayed justice has tremendous effects on the psychological well-being of sexually abused children. Such *behaviours* lead to a few cases being reported because the law enforcers are not taking their work seriously. Children in such circumstances usually have a low self-esteem because he/she is constantly seeing the perpetrator and lives in fear of further victimisation without any necessary psycho-social support. WHO (2011) further argues that children who may experience barrier in seeking or accessing care have of disclosing their experience of sexual abuse to the care giver due to fear of stigma and discrimination attached to sexual activities outside wedlock.

In Tanzania, 87% of care givers reported physical abuse and maltreatment of children and care givers, children who have been exposed to sexual violence prior placement are likely to engage in such behaviours to other children WHO(2012). According to Smith (2010), children who are sexually abused tend to receive

little specialised care .Showing us that we have no adequate systems to cater for sexually abused children. As much as we have removed a child from the place where the sexual abuse occurred and placed in Residential care they may experience a worse scenario leading to great psychological and physical damage.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Identify the nature of sexual abuse experienced by sexually abused children at Alpha Cottages Children's Home?
- What are the psycho-social support challenges faced by sexually abused children housed at Alpha Cottages Children's Home?
- What are the psycho-social support mechanisms which have been put in place at Alpha Cottages Childrens Home ?

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research approach was used, with a case study research design. This Research design is a comprehensive plan for data collection and procedures in an empirical study (Bhattacharjee 2012). Qualitative research is a system of exploring and understanding how a phenomenon is understood by individuals and societies (Creswell 2009). A qualitative approach was chosen because of its ability to explore psychosocial support challenges faced by sexually abused children as perceived by individuals and societies (Creswell 2009). The authors felt that challenges experienced by the children cannot be quantified but needs an in-depth understanding of the psychosocial support challenges.

POPULATION

The research population can be defined as all people or units who have the same variables which are intended for a study (Bhattacharjee 2012). This research had two populations: the children and their caregivers. The population of children was defined as children aged 10 to 18 years who were living at Alpha Cottages Children's Home in Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. A sample of 30 children were selected from Alpha Cottages Children Home. In selecting the participants, the researchers used convenience sampling for both interviews and focus group discussions (FDGs). Convenience sampling is a method that targets most available units of the population. The study used convenience sampling because on the day of data collection some caregivers were providing critical caregiving services to children and could not be disturbed while others were reported to have gone to the local shops.

Data Collection Techniques, Methods and Procedure

The study used interview guides and FGD guides to collect data. Yates (2004) defines in-depth interviews as objective conversations between the researcher and the participants for the sole reason of acquiring information from the latter. This data collection method enabled the researchers to get first-hand information on the psychosocial challenges faced by children in residential care facilities (Yates 2004). Interviews were used because probing enabled the respondents to disclose more information in a friendly environment, thus enabling the researchers to get detailed and confidential data vital for the research. Yates (2004) also highlights that interviews enable researchers to capture facial and other non-verbal cues which may validate or cast doubt on verbal responses. Walliman and Appleton (2009) describe FGDs as groups of people who discuss particular topics in research with the guidance of the researcher. FGDs were used because they stimulate richer responses by seeing the respondents open up. The researchers used focus group guides to maximise the effectiveness of the discussion. This was used for the discussion to remain purposeful and objective driven. The researchers interviewed five children and conducted two FGDs consisting of 10 children each. The researchers also interviewed three caregivers. The interviews and FGDs were not voice

recorded; data were captured by writing interview notes. Interviews were conducted and the notes were written in Shona. After analysis, these were translated into English for purposes of reporting.

Data Analysis

The researchers used thematic content analysis, which is a descriptive presentation of qualitative data (Guest 2012). Qualitative data may take the form of interview transcripts collected from the research participants (Punch 2005). Interview transcripts and field notes were systematically arranged into themes for interpretation and analysis. The data from both interviews and FDGs were grouped according to themes, and from these themes the data were analysed (Punch 2005). The research had two data sets (interview notes and FGD scripts) but they were analysed. Data will be analysed through the use of themes which have been derived from the three research questions.

RESULTS

Data will be analysed through the use of themes which have been derived from the three research questions. The respondent's voices were coded using F1-F6 for girls and M1-M6 for boys.

Identify the nature of sexual abuse experienced by sexually abused children at Alpha Cottages Children's Home?

Rape

The respondents revealed that they have been raped by a stranger or relative.

F1 said "I was raped by my uncle when my grand mother had gone to the fields"

F2 said "when my mother died i was sent to stay with my maternal grandfather who continually sexually abused me."

Exposure to sexually enticing /abusive language

Some young boys recently committed displayed sexually derogative language and tendencies. Research has revealed that such children were rescued from commercial sex work environments and hot spotseg. Ngundu and Lundi Grwoth points along Masvingo to Beitbrige Highway.

Pornography abuse of the internet, cellphones and Television

When the Ruzivo internet hub was installed, it was not restricted hence older boys who in secondary school abused the internet facility and started to view pornographic material. Some went to the extent of viewing pornographic material on tv in the absence of a care giver. The issue came to light when one of the young boys explained to the care giver what they had been seeing TV ,she then made a report and the internet facility was restricted.

M1 said "Our elder brothers viewed videos and pictures of nude people of nude people having sex"

Child Marriages

Child marriage cases are increasing on a daily basis both in the rural and urban settingse.g Masvingo Urban,Zaka ,Chiredzi and Mwenezi rural Districts . The Apostolic sects cannot spared on such issues. One of the respondents who was rescued from child marriage and brought to Alpha Cottages Children's Homeby the Department of Social Services for place of safety.

F3 said that, “ I did not know that it was an offence to get married before the age of 18.”

Commercial Sex work and Cohabitation which exposed children to sexual activities and rape.

Four children were rescued from sexually abusive environment in a high density suburb in Masvingo. The mother who was renting a single room would stay with or bring boy friends in full view of children. The boy friends in turn ended up sexually abusing the children in the absence of the mother. The children 2 girls and 2 boys were rescued by the District Social Services and committed to Alpha Cottages Children’s Home.

F 4 said “I was left in the custodianship of my stepfather after my mother had been transferred to Harare hospital and he continuously sexually abuse me every night”

Homosexualities, lesbian and gay tendencies

Two respondents reported they had been sexually abused by their ‘elder’ brothers in the home. And he threatened them if they reported. The issue came to light when the senior boy was caught red handed sodomising 2 young boys. The issue was reported to the police and the perpetrator was cautioned by the courts. M2 and M3 said that “one of the elder brothers called him to his room and he sexually abused us”

One of the girls was sexually molested by girl who was sexually molested by a girl who had come at the home for place of safety while in transit to reunified with her relatives. The issue on came to light after the girl had already left.

F4 says “I was sleeping during the night when an elder sister came to my bed and sexually molested” “me”

What are the psycho-social support challenges faced by sexually abused children housed at Alpha Cottages Children’s Home?

Attitude of Caregivers

The respondents revealed that they had been stigmatised by the caregivers. A victim of child sexual abuse revealed that care givers labelled them as sexual immoral.

F2said “I was prohibited form liaising with male workers at the” “ home”

M5 said “I was made to sleep alone in a room because my care giver thought I would spoil other innocent” “children”

Lack of Skills

Caregivers are not trained in Trauma management, counselling and psycho-social support. One scenario revealed that a respondent who was now in Secondary school and a victim of sexual abuse would be made to wash blankets of all the young children who had done bedding before going to school as a form of punishment. In spite of the continuous signs of the effects of sexual abuse, no medical attention was sought because of knowledge deficit. According to Powel (2010) In Zimbabwe bedwetting is a serious problem and the care givers did not manage it very well hence adding to psychological stress and lack of self-esteem of those afflicted.

Caregiver ratio

Caregivers are overwhelmed with work and hence this results in burnout resulting in psychological harm of the children. According to Residential Care Standards the caregiver ratio should be 1 as to 8 but because of the continuous placement of children for place of safety the ratio may end up as 1 as to 20 children.

This overwhelms the quality of care children get. This is also supported by Karkson et-al (2005) who says that care givers in America are said to be reactive rather than proactive toward children who have been sexually abused. The home lacks a full complement of staff which implicates on lack of supervision and provision of Psycho-social support to children. The home lacks a matron ,a social worker or counselor. According to Berry et-al (2013) in South Africa they is poor supervision and guidance, poor case management ,poor development of child protection plans were key concerns for social workers in the comparison group. M6 said “ they is overcrowding in the houses to an extent of 1 room to accommodate 6 people when its supposed to have 2 people”

Services

The home is not formerly linked to specialised services such as rape clinic, gender based violence centres .There is no resident counsellor or psychologist to deal with counselling and psycho-social support at Alpha Cottages Children’s Home .The nearest health center available is the provincial hospitals. One of the respondents revealed that in one instance one of the caregivers refused to escort a child to hospital for further treatment and counseling. There are no formal linkages with Organisations that give essential services like Adolescents Sexual Reproductive Health to assist victims and to present sexually related problems.

M4 said “ I wanted to join an adolescent support group for victims of sexual abuse but I was denied the access”

Mixing sexually active and abused children with other children.

Committal of children to Alpha Cottages Children’s Home by the Department of Social Services indiscriminately mixes children from different vulnerability and abusive backgrounds. This has led to other children abusing their peers. Some have gone to the extent influencing other girls to take them back in to the streets and introduce them to sex work. Some of the children have been introduced others to pornography and homosexuality. Her are also bulling tendencies leading to forced sexual cohesion .This traumatised the victimised children who would live without proper counseling.

Failure to hold the perpetrator accountable

Some of the responded who were committed to Alpha Cottages Children’s Home with pending court cases reported that they had been at the home for three years and the perpetrator has not been brought to book.

F 5 said “I have stayed here for 2 years without going to school and I don’t if in future I may be able to complete my studies.”

What are the psycho-social support mechanisms which have been put in place at Alpha Cottages Children’s Home ?

Ideally the home is allocated a probation officer from District Social Services who should regularly attend to Psycho-social support needs of children. However according to the respondents the probation officer visits the home and when he comes he is always in a hurry to attend to the child’s psycho-social support needs.

The children committed are put in to the custody of the superintendent and care giver who also are either not skilled enough in psycho-social support or over whelmed by other care and administration.

The Home is supposed to have inter denominational church service every Sunday for spiritual guidance and counselling. This has not been properly functioning for the past four years.

DISCUSSION

Child sexual abuse comes in various forms which include in descent touch, rape, child marriages, child prostitution sexually enticing language, homosexuality, lesbianism, and gay tendencies. The above forms make use of force and cohesion hence resulting in a lasting traumatic experience. Treatment ,care and support is given to physical rather than psychological needs before the child is committed at Alpha Cottages Children's Home and during their stay at the institution.

Being a caregiver at a children's home requires once to have special counselling skills but due to minimum resources Alpha Cottages children's Home recruits unqualified staff with a passion for children. Many caregivers think that caregivers confuse giving advice with counselling .This sometimes ends injuring the victim rather than providing comfort. This is supported by the Socio-cultural perspective which entails that people are shaped by their surroundings Sari and Buyukunal (2010).As much as the government has made strides to assist victims of sexual abuse but they have focused more on the legal redress rather than assist the victim mentally and psychologically. The is delayed access to justice especially when it comes to arresting the perpetrator hence it leaves the victimised in constant fear and uncertainty. According to Friedrick (2010)in Africa the failure to hold perpetrator of sexual abuse accountable has made the offender to repeat the same crime till violence against children becomes and a common place.

Given the magnitude of the above discussed gaps at Alpha Cottages children's home there is need for development for the development of a psycho-social support strategy for the institution. The strategy should think seriously about staff development in handling abuse cases, counseling, spiritual care and recreation. Stakeholder enrolment in providing Psycho-social support services should also be considered in a structural manner .Local churches, Child rights organisation and legal advice institutions should be strategically engaged to assist victimised children and to offer preventive counseling. The government through the department of Social Services and ZRP Victim Friendly Unit should also prioritise their obligation offering group and individual counseling to children at Alpha Cottages children's Home.

Limitations of the study

Narration of sexual abuse cases aroused many emotions hence the interviews would take long because the respondent could cry during the interview.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion psycho-social support is key component towards achieving healing of sexually abused children at Alpha Cottages. Child sexual abuse has got both physical and psychological reparations on the child and in most cases attention has been given to the physical needs at the expense of the psychological well-being of the child. The traumatic experience that the child will live with has far reaching consequences that affects behavior, growth, concentration, performance and assertiveness.

In as much as Alpha Cottages Children's Home has been a pivotal institution in the care of vulnerable children at both the provincial and national level since its inception in 1954 much attention has been given to the provision of shelter ,food ,education and to some extent physical health care. Psycho-social support has been left presumably to be the duty of the probation officer from the District Social Services department whose role the study has found to be compromised by shortage of staff and competing roles. This has left the children with a gap of counseling services since the care givers also lack counseling skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is need to equip caregivers with psycho-social support skills.
- The government needs to second a resident nurse at every child's home.
- Every clinic to have a child friendly corner to assist victims of sexual abuse.
- Cultural practices which promote child sexual abuse and child marriages should be discouraged and heavy sentences be given to the perpetrators.
- There is great need of continuous multi stakeholder child sexual abuse sensitisation meetings.
- Safe shelters needs to cater for different forms of vulnerability not to bunch them in one place for example one of children rescued from child marriage as a stand-alone ,orphan hood ,sexual abuse , so that proper assistance can be given.
- The probation officer responsible for Alpha Cottages should revive his or her obligations to visit every child at least three times per month for counselling services.
- The government should decentralise post exposure prophylaxis services rather than for it to be administered at a provincial hospital only.
- The Home is supposed to revive it'sinter denominational church service every Sunday for spiritual guidance and counselling.

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