

Hidden in Plain Sight: Child Sexual Violence and Community Silence in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Child sexual violence is a hidden, though common, social pathology in Ghana. The article under discussion questions the dynamics of communal silence, popular indignation, and institutional responsibility by examining one of them of a four-year-old girl in Suhum, Eastern Region, who is reported to have been sexually abused several times by a fourteen-year-old male neighbour in a compound house. Although the child experiences pain immediately after the abuse, it is alleged to have been an intermittent experience over a long period before the issue of caregivers took it seriously, thus revealing the much-needed gap in early identification and community safety of the abused children. The fundamental issue considered in this research is that child sexual abuse repeatedly manifests itself within close residential spaces and at the same time is not detected or acted upon by the families and communities. This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach along with the media and the discourse analysis of the population. The reported incident by GHOne TV and Starr FM is the centre of attention, whereas the reactions of the society that appeared on social media are analysed to clarify the perceptions of the society, moral reactions, and the need of justice. Discussing these commentaries, a number of overriding themes are identified, such as the acute emotional pain of the readers, the wide-spread criticism of the perpetrators, the demand to provide even stronger legal measures, to put the blame on the parents or the guardians, and the disappointment with the perceived inefficiency of the justice system.

The results show that the general discussion comprises the empathy of victims, moral indignation about perpetrators, and the general feeling of anxiety in society over the growing rate of child defilement in Ghana. At the same time, the remarks highlight structural issues on a higher level, including how child vulnerability has become normalized in the domestic context, how people tend to shift responsibility onto the caregivers, and how people would want the legal system to be more effective in deterring culprits. The case also explains the tensions of community-based informal resolution systems and the demands of formal law-enforcement systems as it was demonstrated in Ghana Police Service where formal prosecution was demanded. The paper argues that child sexual violence in Ghana is not a mere criminal activity, but a wider social phenomenon that is perpetuated by the silence of communities and the slow responsiveness of communities to children raised complaints and a weak protective system in each household and neighbourhood. The contextualisation of the Suhum case into the broader sociological debates on vulnerability, power relations, and social responsibility contributes to the study that suggests the need to have more efficient child protection systems, more active social awareness, and stricter enforcement of the law.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, public discourse, social media reactions, community responsibility, Moral outrage, victim empathy, Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Child sexual violence is one of the most shocking but highly hidden forms of malpractice against children in a universal level. In the last ten years, it has been estimated that millions of children become victims of sexual abuse every year, usually in places that one would assume to be secure, like homes, schools, and neighbourhoods. As per the United Nations Children Fund, sexual violence on children largely occurs in the known environments where the patients know their attackers and complicates the detection and reporting of

such acts (UNICEF, 2020). Cultural stigma, fear of social stigma, and community silence in most societies such as Ghana often prevent early disclosure and intervention, enabling the abuse to go on with very little or no detection over a long time. Legal and policy frameworks like the Children Act 1998 that aim at promoting the welfare, rights and safety of minors have been used to ensure the protection against child abuse in Ghana. Even with these legislative protective measures, incidences of child sexual abuse, especially defilement are reported in the country. Empirical research shows that offenders tend to be people living in the social environment of the child such as neighbours, family members and friends (Amoah and Gyimah, 2021; Okyere, 2017). The literature also proves that caregivers can dismiss or under-consider the complaints about abuse at the first stage due to the lack of belief, social influence, or fear of stigmatisation, thus leading to the further victimisation through delaying the reporting (Agyepong et al., 2018). These forces highlight the intricate social and cultural dynamics defining reaction to child sexual violence in Ghanaian society. The problem persists as shown in a recent case that was reported by both GHOne TV and Starr FM. The case of a four years old girl in Suhum, Eastern Region in which it was alleged the girl was repeatedly sexually abused by a fourteen years old boy who lived in the same compound house was the case. The reports further indicate that the alleged abuse took place over a number of months prior to the reporting of the case to the authorities following continuous complaints by the child about the pain. Medical tests later indicated the presence of injuries that were as a result of sexual abuse and the suspect was later arrested as the case went through the court (GHOne TV, 2026; Starr FM, 2026). The event led to a massive response on social media platforms whereby users were emotional, furious at the offenders, wanted heavier penalties, and rebelled at parents and the judicial system.

Even though the available literature has reviewed the prevalence of child sexual abuse and institutional responses in Ghana, not much focus has been on how the discourse of the masses and community response determines the awareness of such instances in the society. Social media platforms become essential areas in the digital age, where citizens make moral judgments, seek justice, and bargain on how to be responsible on social issues. However, not much research has been done to date to systematically examine how such societal reactions relate to wider social views of child protection, responsibility and justice. This paper fills this gap by examining the responses of people concerning the Suhum child abuse case reported, which has gathered public attention and the ways in which their responses would show how communities in Ghana in general feel that they are responsible and should punish and hold to account children. The study uses the qualitative case-study design and discourse analysis of social media comments to examine the ways people perceive and react to incidences of child sexual violence when they are brought to light in the media.

The major aim of the research is to analyse the role of the public discourse on a reported child sexual abuse case to understand the attitude of the society towards child protection, justice, and responsibility in Ghana. In particular, the paper questions overarching themes revealed by the comments left by the public which encompass displaying empathy with the victim, disapproval of the offenders, calls to give them more severe sentences, and blaming the guards or the members of society. This study builds two hypotheses that are guided by the existing literature on how people react to crime and gender-based violence. To begin with, it assumes that the majority of reactions of people to cases of child sexual abuse will be rather emotional outcry and the demand to punish the culprits harshly. Second, it postulates that there will be tensions in the discourse of responsibility whereby some of the responses will be blaming parents, guardians or the members of the communities as to why they failed to avert the acts of the abuse. The study will add to sociological debates on community silence, moral responsibility, and social construct of justice of child sexual violence in Ghana by analysing these responses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interdisciplinary approach to understanding child sexual violence is based on the need to explain not only individual behaviours but also social frameworks that are more permissive that allow child abuse to thrive. One of the relevant lenses is the feminist theory that prefigures the impact of power inequalities and the patriarchal social order on gendered violence in society. Feminist theorists believe that sexual violence is not an isolated action of a single individual but a symptom of unequal power relation which places women and girls in a precarious social situation (Kelly, 1988). In this context, it is young girls who are particularly vulnerable because of cross-effect of age and sex and, consequently, limits their abilities to fight abuse or report it. The second theoretical approach that is applicable is the ecological model of violence, which was

derived by the World Health Organization. This model frame works through the conceptualisation of violence as the result of interaction between individual, relational, community, and societal factors (WHO, 2014). Age, gender, and vulnerability are some of the risk factors at the individual level. On the relational level, the abuse often occurs either in a family or among friends. At the community level, silence, poor surveillance and normalisation of abuse and may allow the perpetrators to work under the radar. Culturally, legal frameworks, and institutional reactions, act to influence how the communities address sexual violence at the societal level. The social reaction theory further explains how the societies react to crime and deviance. Under this view, the general values and societal expectations are reflected in the way people react publicly, whether by condemnation, blame, or punishment (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009). These reactions in the digital era are taking a more and more developed form through social media platforms, where the news of a crime attracts the mass response of people. The study of such responses allows scholars to establish the manner in which the community perceives the concept of responsibility, fairness, and accountability in cases of child sexual abuse.

The available literature on child sexual abuse has focused mainly on prevalence, risk, and response by institutions. International research shows that a large percentage of the victims of sexual abuse are victimized by those who are familiar to the victim such as family members, neighbours or acquaintances (Finkelhor, 2009). These conclusions challenge the general view that abuse is perpetrated mostly by strangers but rather puts more emphasis on the importance of familiar settings in promoting violence on children. In Ghana, a number of researches have been conducted to learn social and institutional aspects of child sexual abuse. Indicatively, Okyere (2017) claims that cultural silence and sexual violence stigmatization usually discourage abuse reporting by victims and families. Equally, Amoah and Gyimah (2021) have discovered that community norms and fear of social embarrassment are some of the factors that cause underreporting of cases of child sexual abuse in Ghanaian communities. Other studies have also been done on the role of the law enforcement institutions, specifically specialised departments in the Ghana Police service that handles domestic violence and child protection cases. However, even though these works present helpful information on institutional reaction and reportage tendencies, they generally focus on legal frameworks, intervention policy or frequency data. As a result, there is a lack of focus on the way the masses perceive and respond to such instances after they are brought to view via the media coverage.

Although there is an ever-increasing research material on child sexual abuse in Ghana, there are still numerous gaps in the knowledge of the role played by the discourse of the society in creating responses to these cases. Social media platforms have recently become essential areas where citizens respond to crime information, show moral indignation and seek justice. Such online debates have the power to impact the general opinion and construct larger discourses about victimhood, responsibility, and punishment. However, no research has been conducted methodically to examine social media commentary on cases of child sexual abuse in Ghana. Majority of the existing studies are based on questionnaires, records or interviews of the victims and service providers. Although such approaches provide valuable data on prevalence and outcomes, they are not able to reflect all the collective moral responses and social attitudes expressed in the public discourse. In addition, child sexual violence is often studied in relation to the adult offenders, leaving a poor emphasis on issues of juvenile offenders, which bring about many questions of responsibility, rehabilitation, and legal liability. The knowledge of the way society reacts to such cases can provide valuable information on the way the society expects justice and protections of children.

The need to fill these gaps is an important aspect of understanding the reaction of societies to child sexual violence and the role of attitudes of the people in shaping policy discussions and institutional response. This research can add to the sociological debate on community secrecy, moral indignation and responsibility through the examination of communal response to a reported incidence of child sexual abuse in Suhum, Ghana. The research is especially notable as it focuses on how common citizens perceive an example of child sexual violence once it turns a mass phenomenon due to publicity in the media through newspapers or TV media like GHOne TV and Starr FM. One can use the analysis of such reactions to shed some light on how the communities negotiate accountability, blame and demand justice in response to violence against children. Finally, the study makes contributions to more general debates about child protection in Ghana by demonstrating the significance of the community awareness and public participation, as well as the enhancement of the institutional response to the sexual violence of underage persons. Knowledge of the

discourse of the masses can also guide policy interventions which would lead to better reporting systems, enhancement of legal deterrence and collective responsibility to protect children.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The approach to this investigation adopts qualitative case study research that incorporates media discourse analysis in order to analyse popular responses to a reported child sexual violence case in Ghana. Case study research can be especially beneficial when it comes to investigating a complicated social phenomenon in its actual settings and allowing scholars to examine the way people perceive events and create meanings (Yin, 2018). The case study under discussion is a alleged instance of sexual exploitation of a four-year-old girl in the Ghanaian town of Suhum in the Eastern Region, which will be used to observe the society as a whole in terms of child protection, perception of justice, and responsibility. The incident was revealed through the media information spread by GHOne TV and Starr FM on 23 February 2026. These announces triggered extensive discussions in the social media and thus offered an empirical chance to study the manner in which constituents react to cases of child sexual abuse that gain high visibility. Media discourse analysis helps to study the framing, perception, and contention of social issues in the social communication spaces (Fairclough, 2013).

Population & Sample

The sample in the research includes all users of social media that responded or commented on news stories about the Suhum case. The fact that the number of people who watched or interacted with the posts is large and cannot be strictly measured makes the study focus on a purposive sample of publicly available comments shared in reaction to the news article. A total of sixty-one comments were chosen to be analysed. These remarks were selected according to the fact that they mentioned explicitly the incident and revealed a range of emotive and ethical responses, such as the phrases of sympathy, anger, demand to punish, and blame caregivers or institutions. It was also appropriate to use purposive sampling as it allows picking the information-rich data that can provide a reflection of attitudes and perceptions of society (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to protect the ethical issues, only moderated comments that were publicly visible were utilized and any personal details like usernames were not included in the analysis.

The process of data collection employed a manual removal and recording of social media comments in response to the report of the news. The comments were summarized to form a text dataset to be analysed later. The main sources that were used to put the case into context were the media reports of GHone TV and Starr FM.

Tools & Protocols

The qualitative thematic analysis followed was the standard procedures of analysis, and it involved the determination of common patterns and themes in textual data (Braun and Clark, 2006). The analysis plan involved a sequence of steps: the familiarisation with the data by reading the comments a few times; pre-preliminary coding to determine salient words, phrases, and sentiments which commenters express; reconciliation of the codes into larger themes which reflect frequently observed patterns in the reaction of the populace; and interpretation of the themes in the context of the broad sociological idea of child protection and community responsibility. This methodology allowed the researcher to elicit the prevailing discourses and emotional reactions that have existed in society with regard to the case.

Analysis plan

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data as it has been established as a common technique in qualitative studies to discover and make sense of patterns of meaning in textual data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The themes that were predominant in the comments were identified and analysed in terms of the attitudes of the society towards child sexual violence.

In particular, the themes explored in the analysis included: displays of empathy and emotional discomfort towards the victim; moral denunciation of the perpetrators, including the use of harsh language and dehumanizing terms; demands that the perpetrators be harshly punished or that the law be reformed, including demands of life imprisonment or even more severe punishment; blame on the parents or caregivers who failed to protect the child; and frustration about the justice system as well as feelings of institutional failure. Interpretation of these themes was related to available sociological theories regarding community reaction to crime, moral outrage, and community responsibility. Through such patterns, the research seeks to make contributions towards understanding the ways communities perceive and react to events of child sexual violence when the cases acquire public attention by making news.

RESULTS

Thematic Analysis of Social Media Responses

An examination of 61 social media comments related to the Suhum child abuse case reported revealed that there were various salient patterns of the response of the population. These reactions are summaries of the wider social understandings of child sexual violence, concept of justice and a sense of societal responsibility in Ghana. There were five main themes, which included affective distress and empathy towards the victim, moral indignation towards offenders, demand of severe punishments, blame on caregivers, and widespread fear in society about child protection.

Table 1. Frequency of Themes in Social Media Comments (n = 61)

Theme	Number of Comments	Percentage (%)
Emotional distress and empathy for the victim	22	36
Moral outrage toward perpetrators	15	25
Demands for severe punishment	12	20
Attribution of blame toward caregivers	8	13
Societal anxiety and calls for reform	4	6

Note: Percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

1. Emotional Distress and Empathy for the Victim

Emotional distress and sympathy to the child victim was the dominating theme. Many users used the words shock, sorrow and deep distress, using the expression heartbreaking, traumatising, with crying emojis frequently attached. Examples include:

I find this caption “traumatising” as an adult.

Heartbreaking.”

These reactions emphasize the increased moral sensitivity of the population and highlight the psychological aspect of the impact of the child sexual abuse report in the society.

2. Moral Outrage Toward Perpetrators

Moral indignation was expressed by numerous commentators who described the criminals as animals, demons, or monsters. Examples include:

What creatures are humans who are playing this nonsense?

this was done by bunch of animals in human body.

These responses refer to a symbolic ostracism of the criminals and are consistent with the sociological theories of moral reactions toward crime, especially when the victims are socially vulnerable.

3. Demands for Severe Punishment

Various critics were calling to have severe legal consequences, such as long prison sentences or life imprisonment. One part of the discourse proceeded to extremist punitive propositions, which is reflective of societal dissatisfaction with a perceived lack in the criminal justice apparatus:

60 years for each defilement.

Take the people to jail and throw the keys away.

The above indicates the expectation of the people that strong legal disinhibition is needed to counter child sexual abuse.

4. Attribution of Blame Toward Caregivers

Some comments assigned responsibility to the child's parents or guardians for failing to act earlier. Examples include:

"What an irresponsible mother."

"At this point the mother too should be arrested."

This illustrates societal emphasis on parental responsibility and the tension between focusing on the offender and scrutinizing caregivers.

5. Societal Anxiety and Calls for Reform

A smaller portion of comments reflected broader societal concern over rising incidents of child abuse and demanded stronger legal reforms:

"Every single month there is a case of a child being defiled."

Calls for stricter legislation and stronger enforcement to protect children.

Some users also invoked moral and religious authority, showing how cultural and ethical frameworks influence societal reactions.

Overall, social media reactions were highly emotional, morally charged, and focused on accountability. While empathy for the victim dominated, criticism of caregivers and concern over systemic inadequacies were also notable. These findings highlight the complex interplay of emotions, moral judgment, and social responsibility in public responses to child sexual abuse, emphasizing the importance of community awareness and legal reform.

CONCLUSION

The examination of social media reactions to the Suhum child abuse case shows that Ghanaians' emotions are intensely sentimental, morally motivated, and focused on calls for accountability and justice. The study identifies five major cultural trends: sympathy for the victim, moral indignation toward offenders, demands for harsh punishment, assigning culpability to caregivers, and general societal concern over kid safety. These results demonstrate that child sexual violence is a broader-societal phenomena influenced by public discourse, cultural norms, and community attitudes in addition to being a legal or family issue. Discussions are dominated by empathy and moral censure, but calls for institutional reform and monitoring of caregivers show that the public is aware of larger structural and protective inadequacies. At the end, the study emphasizes how important it is to confront child sexual abuse through community involvement, societal awareness, and strong legal enforcement. To mitigate abuse and ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable children in Ghana, it is imperative to strengthen child protection systems, encourage timely reporting, and cultivate community responsibility.

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