

Community Perceptions and Responses to the Rise in Reported Defilement Cases: A Qualitative Study of Attitudes, Reporting Practices and the Dynamics of Historical Silence in Mungwi District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Defilement and child sexual abuse (CSA) remain major public health, legal and human rights concerns globally and within Zambia. Recent increases in reported defilement cases in Zambia have generated public concern regarding whether the rise reflects an actual escalation in abuse or improvements in disclosure, awareness and reporting mechanisms associated with the erosion of historical silence surrounding defilement.

Aim: To explore community perceptions and responses to the rise in reported defilement cases in Mungwi District, Zambia, with particular attention to attitudes, reporting practices, stigma and socio-cultural dynamics shaping disclosure and concealment.

Methods: The study was guided by an interpretivist paradigm and employed an exploratory qualitative research design. Purposive and Snowball non-random sampling methods were used to recruit 48 participants comprising community members, traditional leaders, teachers, health workers, police officers, and child protection stakeholders from selected rural communities in Mungwi District. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six step thematic analysis framework.

Findings: The findings reveal that defilement is shaped by interconnected social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Poverty, economic dependency, weak parental supervision, alcohol and substance abuse, and harmful patriarchal beliefs were identified as major contributors to children's vulnerability to abuse and exploitation. The study further established that stigma, fear of shame, victim-blaming attitudes, and concerns over family reputation contribute significantly to concealment and non-reporting of cases. Historical silence surrounding sexual abuse was found to be socially reinforced through cultural taboos, informal settlements, and distrust in formal justice systems. Participants reported that delayed court processes, limited access to child protection services, and inadequate psychosocial support discourage many families from pursuing legal action. At the same time, the findings demonstrated evidence of gradual erosion of historical silence through increased awareness campaigns, legal reforms, school-based sensitisation programmes, media engagement, and community education initiatives. Consequently, participants perceived the rise in reported defilement cases as reflecting both the continued prevalence of abuse and improved disclosure and reporting practices within communities.

Conclusion: The study concludes that addressing defilement requires a holistic and multi-sectoral approach that addresses structural poverty, harmful social norms, institutional weaknesses, and stigma while strengthening child protection systems, access to justice, community awareness, and survivor support services. The study recommends strengthening rural child protection structures, enhancing community sensitisation,

discouraging informal case settlements, improving psychosocial support services, and promoting coordinated responses among government institutions, traditional leaders, schools, religious organizations, and civil society actors.

Keywords: Defilement; Child Sexual Abuse; Reporting Practices; Historical Silence; Stigma; Community Perceptions; Child Protection.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Defilement remains one of the most pervasive violations of children's rights globally and constitutes a major public health, legal and social protection concern. The World Health Organization estimates that approximately one in five girls and one in thirteen boys experience sexual abuse before the age of eighteen (WHO, 2022). Beyond immediate physical harm, defilement is associated with long-term psychological trauma, depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal behaviour, substance abuse, educational disruption and intergenerational cycles of violence (UNICEF, 2023). Although child protection systems have expanded globally, substantial under-reporting persists due to fear, stigma, family pressure and cultural silence surrounding sexual violence against children.

Recent international scholarship increasingly argues that rising statistics on defilement may not necessarily reflect proportional increases in actual incidence but may instead indicate improved awareness, stronger reporting systems and greater willingness among survivors and families to disclose abuse. UNICEF (2023) observes that in many societies, sexual abuse historically remained concealed because of patriarchal norms, fear of social shame, distrust in institutions and cultural taboos surrounding sexuality. Consequently, increases in reported cases may partly signify the erosion of historical silence rather than solely an escalation in abuse itself. Distinguishing between increased occurrence and increased disclosure is therefore essential for developing effective child protection interventions and interpreting crime statistics accurately.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, defilement continues to pose a serious challenge despite legal reforms and growing advocacy efforts. Regional studies demonstrate that poverty, gender inequality, weak institutional protection systems, harmful social norms and inadequate access to justice significantly increase children's vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation (Meinck et al., 2022). UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa (2024) further reports that many cases occur within homes and communities where perpetrators are often known to victims. Disclosure is frequently discouraged by fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, family breakdown and community stigma, particularly within rural and patriarchal settings where social cohesion and family reputation are highly valued.

In Zambia, defilement has increasingly emerged as a major national child protection concern. National evidence indicates persistently high levels of sexual violence against children, particularly girls. UNICEF Zambia (2025) reports that approximately 20% of young women and 10% of young men aged between 18 and 24 experienced sexual violence during childhood, while 28% of girls aged 13-17 reported that their first sexual experience was unwanted. Similarly, statistics from the Zambia Police Victim Support Unit indicate that defilement consistently constitutes one of the most reported sexual offences nationally, accounting for more than two-thirds of reported sexual violence cases involving children (Zambia Police Service, 2025). These trends have intensified public concern regarding child safety, family protection systems and community responses to abuse.

Some recent studies conducted in Zambia suggest that the rise in reported defilement cases reflects a complex interaction between persistent abuse, expanding awareness and changing disclosure practices. Matafwali, Rolls and Msidi (2024) observed fluctuating but consistently high levels of reported child sexual abuse during pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic periods, highlighting both continuing vulnerability and increased visibility of abuse. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed children to heightened risks due to school closures, economic hardship, weakened social protection systems and prolonged confinement within vulnerable households (UNICEF, 2023). However, scholars caution against interpreting increased reporting as direct evidence of proportional growth in abuse incidence. Instead, emerging evidence points toward the "breaking of silence" phenomenon, whereby legal reforms, media attention, community sensitisation and child

protection campaigns have encouraged greater disclosure of previously concealed abuse cases (Matafwali et al., 2024).

Despite these developments, barriers to disclosure remain deeply embedded within many Zambian communities. Studies conducted in both urban and rural settings indicate that families often conceal abuse to protect household reputation, avoid social embarrassment or preserve economic relationships with perpetrators (Chitundu et al., 2024). Afrobarometer (2023) further found that public confidence in community child protection systems remains limited, with many respondents identifying stigma, fear of shame and distrust in institutions as major barriers to reporting child abuse. Such findings suggest that formal legal reforms alone may not sufficiently transform deeply rooted social norms and community perceptions surrounding sexual violence.

The Zambian government has undertaken significant legislative and institutional reforms aimed at strengthening child protection systems. The enactment of the Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022 represented a major milestone in harmonising national legislation with international child rights frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The legislation strengthened mandatory reporting provisions, child safeguarding responsibilities and institutional coordination mechanisms for responding to abuse (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022). Additional interventions such as the National Child Safeguarding Framework and expansion of One-Stop Centres for survivors of gender-based violence have further enhanced formal reporting and survivor support systems.

Nevertheless, legal and institutional reforms continue to encounter resistance from entrenched socio-cultural norms that discourage open discussion of sexual abuse. In many communities, conversations surrounding sexuality remain highly sensitive, particularly when abuse involves family members, respected community leaders or economically influential individuals. Victims and caregivers frequently fear victim-blaming, social rejection and community ostracism following disclosure (Chilambe et al., 2023). In some cases, economic vulnerability compels families to withdraw cases or pursue informal settlements where perpetrators contribute to household survival. These dynamics reinforce historical silence and weaken formal justice processes, particularly within rural communities characterised by poverty, limited institutional access and patriarchal social structures.

Within rural districts such as Mungwi, the interaction between poverty, cultural norms, weak institutional trust and limited child protection infrastructure may intensify both vulnerability to abuse and barriers to disclosure. Although national statistics indicate increasing reports of defilement, limited qualitative evidence exists regarding how communities themselves interpret these trends. Community members may perceive the rise in reported cases as evidence of moral decline and increasing abuse, while others may interpret it as an outcome of growing awareness, legal empowerment and greater willingness among victims and families to speak out against previously concealed violence. Understanding these competing interpretations is critical because community perceptions influence disclosure practices, reporting behaviour, support for survivors and engagement with formal child protection institutions.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature on defilement in Zambia remains quantitative and largely focused on prevalence rates, legal responses and institutional challenges. Limited attention has been directed toward understanding how ordinary community members construct meaning around rising defilement statistics and how historical silence, stigma and cultural taboos shape reporting practices. This creates an important empirical and conceptual gap, particularly within rural contexts where socio-cultural dynamics strongly influence responses to abuse. Without understanding community perceptions, interventions may fail to address the underlying social mechanisms sustaining concealment, delayed reporting and distrust in formal systems.

This study therefore seeks to explore community perceptions and responses to rising defilement cases in Mungwi District of Zambia by examining how attitudes, stigma, historical silence and reporting practices shape disclosure and interpretation of abuse trends. Specifically, the study investigates whether communities perceive the increase in reported defilement cases as evidence of worsening abuse or as a consequence of greater disclosure resulting from changing social norms, legal awareness and weakening cultures of silence. A clear understanding of these dynamics is essential for designing culturally responsive interventions

capable of strengthening community-based child protection systems, survivor support services and reporting mechanisms.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using an exploratory design within an interpretivist paradigm. The study was informed by Social Norms Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Stigma Theory. Exploratory research design in qualitative research emphasises interpretation of lived experience, recognising that meaning is co-constructed through social interaction and contextual understanding rather than merely described (Addeo, 2013; Qazi and Rashidi, 2018b). This design was appropriate for exploring how the community members and key stakeholders responded to the rise in reported defilement cases in Mungwi District, Zambia.

Study Site

The research was conducted in selected rural communities of Mungwi District in Northern Province, Zambia. The communities are predominantly Bemba-speaking, largely depend on subsistence agriculture, and remain strongly connected to traditional cultural practices and community structures.

Target Population

The main study population comprised community members from selected rural communities in Mungwi District. The key informants included the traditional leaders, teachers, health workers, police officers, and child protection stakeholders. Creswell (2013:155) states that “It is essential that all participants have [similar lived] experience of the phenomenon being studied”. Thus, qualitative research aims to allow participants with similar experience to begin a process of reflection and engagement with the meaning of their personal experience of responding to the rising defilement cases (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008).

Sampling Methods

The goal of this study was not to recruit a representative sample, but rather to focus on participants who possessed similar characteristics that were relevant to the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The researcher employed purposive and snowball non-random sampling methods in recruiting the participants for the study. These participants were selected because they shared attributes and experiences relevant to the study phenomenon (Bryman, 2016). In this regard, purposive and Snowball sampling techniques were employed as features of qualitative research in order to enable the researchers to select knowledgeable participants.

Sample size

The sample comprised 48 participants. This number was considered sufficient once thematic saturation had been achieved. In qualitative research, sample size is not determined statistically but is guided by the depth, relevance, and richness of the information provided by participants, as well as the point at which no substantially new themes emerge (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Accordingly, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews with participants drawn from community members and key stakeholders in Mungwi District.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) using semi-structured interview guides to explore community perceptions and responses to rising defilement cases in Mungwi District, Zambia. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to exploring lived experiences because they allow participants to express their views in detail while enabling the researcher to probe, clarify, and follow up on emerging issues (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were conducted in participants’ preferred languages, namely English and Bemba. To protect anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms. These methods were preferred because they enabled the researchers to ask clarifying,

probing, and follow-up questions and to adapt the sequence or wording of questions depending on participants' responses (Best and Kahn, 2003).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data was analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model. Braun and Clarke recommended that qualitative research focuses on the following steps, namely: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. In this study, interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants. The audios were then transcribed and uploaded into the qualitative research software called NVivo version 15 pro to assist in organizing and coding data. Themes were interpreted using theoretical lenses, including Social Norms Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Stigma Theory. The researchers read through the transcripts and identified open codes using NVivo 15 Pro. Coding aided in identifying concepts, categories and sub-categories that were further broken down. Open coding involves reading the texts 'word-by-word', 'line-by-line', and repeatedly to identify phrases that interviewees were using to describe things and issues. The coded data was then categorised (grouped) according to different characteristics to better understand the data. The categories were then grouped to form sub-themes and then eventually, the sub-themes were grouped to come up with the main themes. This enabled the researcher to categorize items according to what description they offered (Bryman, 2012).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity requires the researcher to remain aware of how his or her background, assumptions, values, and decisions may influence the research process and the construction of knowledge (Hesse-Biber and Johnson, 2015). As this was a qualitative study, the researchers recognised that their experiences and perspectives could shape the design of the study, data collection, interpretation, and analysis (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). To minimise bias, the researchers engaged in reflexive self-awareness throughout the study and sought to bracket preconceived assumptions about the lived experiences of rural communities in Mungwi District. Additionally, the primary researcher had professional experience in child protection and community development. To enhance trustworthiness, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and regular consultation with the supervisor were employed throughout data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

In any research conducted, ethical issues must be taken into consideration by the researcher (Bryman, 2016). The researchers ensured that ethics of social research were upheld. The main ethical issues addressed in the course of the research were; approval, permission, access and acceptance, informed consent, confidentiality, right to privacy and anonymity, right to withdrawal, beneficence, justice and fairness. The ethical approval number for the study was MU/DRI/REC/2026/040.

Study Findings (Results)

Introduction

This section presents findings of the study on the community perceptions and responses to the rise in reported defilement cases in Mungwi District, Northern Province of Zambia. The findings are based on data generated through in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). Consistent with the exploratory research design, emphasis was placed on understanding how participants themselves experience, interpret, and respond to the rise in reported defilement cases within their everyday community environments. Findings are presented thematically in line with the study objectives and research questions. The major themes that emerged include: (1) social, cultural, and economic drivers of vulnerability; (2) family-based concealment and informal settlements; (3) historical silence, stigma, and cultural taboos; (4) institutional barriers affecting reporting and victim support; and (5) changing awareness and interpretations of rising defilement statistics.

Background Characteristics of Participants

The study participants included one Education and Counselling Coordinator, one health worker, one One Stop Centre Officer, one Victim Support Unit Officer, two traditional leaders (one male and one female), one church leader, one NGO representative, three focus group discussions comprising 10 women, 11 men, and 13 adolescents (7 females and 6 males), and six in-depth interview participants comprising three female caregivers and three community members (two males and one female). The diversity of participants strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing the study to capture multiple perspectives regarding defilement, reporting behaviour, and community responses.

Participants reported either direct or indirect experience with defilement cases through professional responsibilities, community leadership roles, family interactions, or victim support interventions. Their narratives revealed that perceptions regarding defilement are strongly shaped by gender relations, cultural expectations, economic hardship, institutional experiences, and community norms governing silence and disclosure.

Institutional records obtained from health facilities and the One Stop Centre further contextualised participant narratives. Health records revealed that 107 caesarean sections were conducted on girls below sixteen years of age during the period from January to December, 2025, while five health facilities recorded 248 pregnancies among girls aged between thirteen and fifteen years. In contrast, the One Stop Centre officially recorded only twenty-eight defilement cases during the same period. Participants interpreted these disparities as suggestive of substantial underreporting, particularly given that sexual intercourse with girls below the age of consent may constitute defilement under Zambian law.

Many participants argued that a substantial proportion of adolescent pregnancies among minors legally constitute defilement under Zambian law but are rarely reported to law enforcement agencies because families prefer informal settlements, fear stigma, or depend economically on perpetrators. Consequently, participants believed that official statistics capture only a fraction of actual abuse occurring within rural communities.

Specific codes and themes emerging from data

In line with the research design, the findings emphasized the importance of giving a voice to study participants. This approach is in line with the epistemological methods of understanding the social worlds based on the lived experiences of research participants.

Table 1: Emerging themes and subthemes

Themes	Sub-themes
Social, Cultural, and Economic Factors Contributing To the Rise in Reported Defilement Cases	Poverty And Economic Vulnerability <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Harmful Cultural Norms and Early Sexualisation of Girls ○ Parental Negligence and Weak Child Supervision ○ Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Sexual Enhancement Substances
Community Attitudes Towards Reporting Defilement Cases	Family-Based Abuse and Concealment Informal Settlements and Compensation
Historical Silence, Stigma, and Cultural Taboos	Fear, Shame, and Community Stigma Silence Within Families and Communities
Institutional Challenges Affecting Reporting	Distrust In The Police And Justice Systems Challenges Supporting Victims
Improved Awareness and Reporting Practices	Increased reporting and disclosure

Social, Cultural, and Economic Drivers of Vulnerability

Poverty, Economic Dependency, and Transactional Vulnerability

Poverty emerged as one of the strongest structural factors shaping both children's vulnerability to defilement and the concealment of abuse. Participants consistently explained that severe economic hardship exposes adolescent girls to exploitative sexual relationships, particularly where families struggle to meet basic household needs such as food, school fees, clothing, and healthcare. Participants described how transactional sexual relationships become normalised within conditions of chronic poverty. In such contexts, child protection is often subordinated to immediate household survival. Several respondents indicated that some families accept financial compensation from perpetrators rather than pursuing legal action because imprisonment is perceived as economically disadvantageous. One participant explained:

"Parents would rather benefit now than concern themselves with the welfare of the child."

Another participant stated:

"Most cases are only reported if the perpetrator fails to fulfil what was agreed during compensation negotiations."

These findings suggest that economic dependency simultaneously increases children's exposure to exploitation while also discouraging formal reporting. In many cases, perpetrators were described as breadwinners, relatives, or individuals providing financial support to vulnerable households. Reporting such individuals was therefore perceived as threatening household economic stability. A family member illustrated this perception by stating:

"It is better we benefit through informal settlement than letting the government benefit while we remain with nothing."

This finding demonstrates how poverty operates not only as a background condition but also as a structural mechanism sustaining silence, informal justice practices, and continued abuse within communities.

Harmful Cultural Norms and the Early Sexualisation of Girls

Participants identified patriarchal cultural beliefs and harmful social norms as important drivers of children's vulnerability to defilement. Many participants explained that initiation ceremonies and traditional teachings sometimes reinforce perceptions that girls who have reached puberty are ready for marriage and sexual relationships regardless of their legal age. Participants repeatedly linked physical development, particularly menstruation and breast development, to community assumptions regarding adulthood and sexual readiness. One participant explained:

"In the village, once a child develops breasts and starts menstruating, people begin to see her as ready for marriage."

Such perceptions were described as weakening community protection towards adolescent girls while simultaneously normalising child marriage and exploitative sexual relationships. Participants further argued that some traditional teachings encourage girls to prioritise obedience to men and preparation for marriage rather than education, autonomy, and self-protection.

The findings further revealed that cultural taboos surrounding sexuality discourage open discussions about sexual violence. Community members often avoid discussing sexual abuse publicly because it is regarded as shameful or culturally inappropriate. This silence contributes to delayed disclosure and reinforces victim vulnerability. The findings demonstrate that cultural norms shape both the occurrence of abuse and the social responses surrounding disclosure, blame, and protection.

Weak Parental Supervision and Changing Family Structures

Weak parental supervision emerged as another major factor increasing children's vulnerability to abuse. Participants linked inadequate supervision to changing family structures, seasonal migration for farming activities, economic pressures, and increased parental absence from households. Participants explained that many parents spend extended periods in farming fields locally referred to as "kumitanda" and "kufibela," leaving children unsupervised or under the care of older siblings who are themselves minors. One participant explained:

"Many parents migrate seasonally to farming fields, leaving children unattended for long periods."

Participants also noted that excessive trust in relatives and close community members increases vulnerability because many perpetrators are known to victims. Perpetrators were frequently identified as uncles, grandfathers, neighbours, stepfathers, and family friends. One respondent stated:

"Parents over-trust uncles. Even when a child returns home late with the uncle, no one questions it."

The findings therefore challenge dominant assumptions that defilement is primarily committed by strangers. Instead, abuse was widely understood as occurring within familiar social networks characterised by trust, kinship, and dependency.

Participants further linked reduced parental monitoring to growing exposure to smartphones, pornography, and peer influence. Several respondents believed that digital technologies increasingly shape adolescent sexual behaviour in contexts where parental guidance is weak or inconsistent.

Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Sexual Exploitation

Substance abuse emerged as a significant factor contributing to sexual violence and exploitation within communities. Participants consistently associated alcohol, cannabis, pornography, and locally known sexual enhancement substances such as Mutoto, Congo Dust, Kumbucha, and Natotela with heightened sexual aggression, impaired judgement, and exploitative behaviour. One participant explained:

"Children now have access to smartphones without parental control, and what they watch influences their behaviour."

Participants believed that pornography and substance abuse contribute to risky sexual behaviour among both adolescents and adults, while simultaneously weakening moral restraint and increasing violence within communities.

Findings further demonstrate how technological exposure, substance abuse, and socioeconomic instability interact to increase vulnerability to child sexual exploitation within rural settings.

Family-Based Concealment and Informal Justice Practices

Abuse Within Families and Trusted Relationships

Participants consistently reported that perpetrators are commonly known to victims and are often embedded within family and community networks. Perpetrators frequently included uncles, grandfathers, neighbours, stepfathers, and other trusted individuals. One participant stated:

"Three-quarters of perpetrators are family members."

Because perpetrators are often economically or socially connected to households, participants explained that families frequently conceal abuse to preserve relationships, avoid conflict, and protect household livelihoods. Another participant stated:

“People fear that if the breadwinner is jailed the family will suffer.”

Victims were reportedly pressured into silence by relatives seeking to avoid shame, family conflict, or social embarrassment. These findings demonstrate how family loyalty and economic dependency function as major barriers to disclosure and formal reporting.

Informal Settlements and Compensation

Participants revealed that many defilement cases are resolved informally through financial compensation rather than through formal legal processes. Families reportedly negotiate “damages” with perpetrators in exchange for silence and withdrawal of complaints. One participant explained:

“Cases are reported because the perpetrator failed to fulfil what they promised to pay.”

Formal reporting was often described as occurring only when negotiations collapsed, when pregnancy resulted, or when the victim developed severe medical complications.

From the presentation above, the findings suggest that informal settlements contribute substantially to underreporting while simultaneously protecting perpetrators from prosecution. These practices perpetuate cycles of abuse by prioritising family reputation and economic gain over child protection and justice.

Historical Silence, Stigma, and Cultural Taboos

Fear, Shame, and Victim Stigmatisation

Stigma emerged as one of the strongest barriers to disclosure. Participants explained that victims and their families often fear gossip, social rejection, victim-blaming, and reputational damage following disclosure. One participant stated:

“Children are labelled as the child who was defiled.”

Participants further explained that communities frequently prioritise family honour and social respectability over justice for survivors. Consequently, victims often experience secondary victimisation after disclosure. Fear of stigma was therefore reported to contribute to delayed reporting, emotional trauma, and prolonged silence surrounding abuse.

Historical Silence Within Families and Communities

Participants repeatedly described sexual abuse as a historically silenced issue within families and communities. Disclosure was often discouraged in order to preserve social cohesion and protect relatives from criminal prosecution. One participant explained:

“No one wants to prosecute their own relative.”

Participants further stated that some church leaders, relatives, and traditional leaders encourage forgiveness and reconciliation instead of legal action. In some cases, silence was reinforced through fear of retaliation, witchcraft accusations, or exclusion from community networks.

These findings suggest that historical silence surrounding defilement is deeply embedded within broader cultural systems governing family loyalty, social harmony, and community reputation.

Institutional Barriers Affecting Reporting and Victim Support

Distrust in Police and Justice Systems

Participants expressed widespread dissatisfaction with police response systems and court procedures. Common concerns included lack of transport, delayed investigations, witness intimidation, prolonged court processes, and acquittals resulting from insufficient evidence.

“Police say they have no fuel, yet vehicles are used elsewhere while a child suffers.” (FGD participant, Male 36)

Participants believed that institutional inefficiencies discourage victims and families from pursuing formal legal processes. Delays and unsuccessful prosecutions were perceived as reinforcing community distrust in state institutions. The findings therefore demonstrate that weak institutional capacity contributes directly to underreporting and continued reliance on informal settlements.

Inadequate Support Services for Survivors

Participants identified major gaps in psychosocial support, counselling services, treatment adherence, and follow-up systems for survivors. Limited police presence in rural areas and inadequate referral mechanisms further weakened victim support systems.

“A victim who does not disclose their defiler is usually exposed to reinfection because the perpetrator continues with the abuse.” (One Stop Centre [OSC] officer)

Participants emphasised the need for decentralised victim support services, improved referral systems, expanded counselling services, and stronger coordination between healthcare providers, police, schools, and community leaders.

Changing Awareness and Interpretations of Rising Defilement Statistics

Despite persistent barriers, participants acknowledged significant improvements in community awareness and reporting practices. Increased awareness was attributed to schools, churches, non-governmental organisations, Victim Support Units, One Stop Centres, and the Children’s Code Act No. 12 of 2022. One participant stated:

“People are now coming forward because they know where to report.”

Participants explained that communities are increasingly aware of children’s rights and available reporting mechanisms. Consequently, some participants believed that rising statistics partly reflect improved disclosure and reduced silence rather than a simple increase in abuse. At the same time, many participants also believed that actual incidents of abuse are increasing due to worsening poverty, substance abuse, weak parenting, and changing moral behaviour. One participant summarised this dual interpretation by stating:

“Cases are increasing, but people are also becoming more willing to report.”

The findings therefore suggest that rising defilement statistics in Mungwi District reflect the combined effects of increased vulnerability and increased disclosure. The apparent rise in cases cannot therefore be interpreted exclusively as evidence of growing abuse without considering the gradual erosion of historical silence and improvements in reporting systems.

These findings demonstrate that defilement within Mungwi District is shaped by interconnected social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors. Poverty, harmful gender norms, weak parental supervision, substance abuse, family-based concealment, stigma, and institutional distrust collectively increase children’s vulnerability while simultaneously discouraging disclosure and formal reporting. The findings further reveal that historical silence surrounding defilement remains deeply embedded within family and community structures. However, increased awareness, legal reforms, and improved reporting mechanisms are gradually encouraging greater disclosure.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

This discussion chapter critically interprets the empirical findings of the study on the Community Perceptions and Responses to the Rise in Defilement Cases: A Qualitative Study of Attitudes, Reporting Practices and the Dynamics of Historical Silence in Mungwi District. The discussion is organised according to the major themes emerging from the study and interpreted through the lenses of Social Norms Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and Stigma Theory. The findings demonstrate that the rise in reported defilement cases in Mungwi District reflects both structural vulnerabilities that increase children's exposure to abuse and changing community attitudes that have improved disclosure and reporting. The study further shows that poverty, harmful cultural norms, stigma, institutional weaknesses, and historical silence continue to shape community responses to defilement in Zambia.

Poverty, Structural Vulnerability and Exposure to Defilement

The findings established that poverty remains a major structural driver of children's vulnerability to defilement in Mungwi District. Participants associated economic hardship with weak parental supervision, school dropout, child neglect, transactional relationships, and exposure of children to unsafe environments. These findings suggest that economic deprivation reduces families' capacity to provide adequate protection and increases children's dependence on adults who may exploit them sexually.

The study further revealed significant disparities between officially reported defilement cases and pregnancy-related data obtained from health facilities. While the One Stop Centre recorded relatively few defilement cases, health facilities reported substantially higher numbers of pregnancies and caesarean deliveries among girls below the legal age of consent. This discrepancy strongly suggests continued underreporting of defilement within the district. Similar findings have been reported in recent African studies which show that many cases remain concealed because families fear stigma, financial instability, and social disruption (UNICEF, 2023; Matafwali et al., 2024).

The findings align with Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which explains that child vulnerability is shaped by interconnected social systems operating at household, community, institutional, and societal levels. Poverty weakens protective mechanisms within families and communities while simultaneously limiting access to justice and social services. At the same time, Social Norms Theory explains how economically vulnerable households may normalise silence surrounding abuse in order to preserve family relationships or economic survival (Cislaghi and Heise, 2020). Similar evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that financial dependence on perpetrators frequently discourages disclosure of abuse (McPherson et al., 2025).

From the discussion above, the findings suggest that legal interventions alone cannot effectively address defilement without simultaneously addressing broader socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, and weak child protection systems.

Harmful Cultural Norms, Patriarchy and Community Silence

The study found that harmful cultural beliefs and patriarchal attitudes continue to reinforce vulnerability to defilement among girls in Mungwi District. Participants explained that puberty is frequently interpreted as readiness for sexual relationships, marriage, or adult responsibilities. Such beliefs reduce community protection for adolescent girls and normalise exploitative relationships between adults and minors.

The findings further revealed that patriarchal norms promoting male authority and female submissiveness discourage victims from reporting abuse and weaken community accountability. Families often prioritised family reputation, social harmony, and cultural expectations over legal justice. In some cases, informal settlements and reconciliation with perpetrators were preferred to formal reporting mechanisms. These findings are consistent with recent studies showing that patriarchal social systems normalise violence against girls and discourage disclosure of abuse (WHO, 2022; UN Women, 2024).

Social Norms Theory by Bicchieri (2017) provides an important explanation for these findings. Community members often conform to socially accepted expectations regarding obedience, family honour, and silence

even when such norms undermine child protection. Fear of social shame and community judgement discourages reporting and reinforces tolerance of abuse within families and communities (Cislaghi and Heise, 2020; Earnshaw and Chaudoir, 2009). Another study by Fulu et al. (2023) similarly demonstrates that gender inequality and patriarchal authority structures continue to weaken reporting systems across many African societies.

From the discussion above, the findings indicate that efforts to reduce defilement require long-term transformation of harmful gender norms, increased community sensitisation, and strengthened child protection mechanisms capable of challenging deeply embedded patriarchal attitudes.

Historical Silence, Stigma and Non-Disclosure

The study established that historical silence, stigma, and victim-blaming remain major barriers to disclosure of defilement cases in Mungwi District. Participants explained that survivors and caregivers frequently fear gossip, ridicule, discrimination, and social exclusion if abuse becomes publicly known. Consequently, many cases remain concealed within families and communities.

The findings demonstrate that silence surrounding defilement is socially reproduced through cultural taboos and intergenerational attitudes discouraging open discussion of sexuality and abuse. Similar findings have been reported in recent studies conducted in low-resource contexts where concerns regarding family honour and social reputation contribute significantly to underreporting of child sexual abuse (Ligiero et al., 2022; Meinck et al., 2022).

These findings strongly support Stigma Theory by Earnshaw and Chaudoir (2009), which explains how shame and fear of negative social judgement shape behaviour. Victims and their families often avoid disclosure because of anticipated stigma and community rejection. The findings also reflect the concept of courtesy stigma, whereby families fear social condemnation because of their association with survivors of abuse. Consequently, silence becomes a collective coping mechanism that protects social standing while simultaneously perpetuating impunity and continued victimisation.

From the discussion above, the results demonstrate that breaking historical silence requires culturally sensitive awareness programmes, psychosocial support services, and community dialogue aimed at reducing victim-blaming attitudes and promoting supportive disclosure environments.

Institutional Weaknesses and Reporting Challenges

The findings revealed widespread dissatisfaction with institutional responses to defilement cases. Participants reported delayed investigations, prolonged court procedures, inadequate police responses, corruption, and limited victim support services. These weaknesses discouraged many families from pursuing formal reporting channels. The findings correspond with studies conducted in Zambia which identify poor coordination among child protection institutions, inadequate resources, and weak access to psychosocial services as major barriers to effective justice delivery (Tembo et al., 2021; UNICEF Zambia, 2023). Participants explained that lengthy court processes, transportation costs, and fear of intimidation often lead families to abandon cases before prosecution is completed.

Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) helps explain these institutional challenges by emphasising the influence of exosystem structures such as police services, courts, and social welfare institutions on child wellbeing. Weak institutional systems indirectly shape household behaviour by reducing confidence in formal reporting mechanisms. When communities perceive institutions as ineffective, they are more likely to conceal abuse or pursue informal settlements.

From the discussion above, the findings suggest that strengthening institutional effectiveness, improving coordination among agencies, and expanding victim support services are essential for improving public trust and increasing reporting of defilement cases.

Increased Awareness and the Erosion of Historical Silence

Despite persistent challenges, the study revealed evidence of increasing public awareness and growing willingness among community members to report defilement cases. Participants acknowledged the role of schools, churches, media campaigns, civil society organisations, and legal reforms in encouraging open discussion of defilement. The findings suggest that the rise in reported defilement cases may partly reflect improved awareness and disclosure rather than solely an actual increase in incidents. Increased access to information through schools, radio programmes, and community sensitisation initiatives appears to have contributed to changing attitudes towards reporting and child protection. Similar findings have been reported by UNICEF (2023) and Fulu and Miedema (2022), who observed that awareness campaigns significantly improve disclosure and reduce tolerance for silence surrounding abuse.

The Stigma Theory Earnshaw and Chaudoir (2009) explained that increased awareness contributes to reducing shame and victim-blaming attitudes associated with disclosure. As communities become more informed about children's rights and legal protections, disclosure becomes increasingly socially acceptable. This gradual erosion of historical silence represents an important shift towards improved accountability and child protection.

From the discussion above, the findings demonstrate that the increase in reported defilement cases in Mungwi District should be interpreted cautiously. While structural vulnerabilities associated with poverty and harmful cultural practices continue to expose children to abuse, increased reporting also reflects changing community attitudes, improved awareness, and gradual weakening of historical silence surrounding defilement.

CONCLUSION

The study findings demonstrate that defilement is not merely an individual criminal act but a deeply embedded social problem shaped by poverty, gender inequality, harmful cultural beliefs, stigma, weak institutional systems, and changing community awareness. The study further established that community attitudes significantly influence whether cases are reported or concealed. Fear of shame, victim-blaming, family reputation, and economic dependency on perpetrators often discourage disclosure and promote informal settlements. The study also revealed that historical silence, cultural taboos, and stigma continue to shape non-disclosure practices within families and communities. Silence surrounding sexual abuse remains socially reproduced through patriarchal norms and cultural expectations that discourage open discussion of sexuality and abuse. The results also indicated that the rise in reported defilement cases reflects both increasing vulnerability among children and improvements in awareness, disclosure, and reporting mechanisms. Schools, churches, media campaigns, legal reforms, and child protection programmes have gradually contributed to breaking historical silence and encouraging reporting. Generally, the study concludes that rising defilement statistics should not be interpreted solely as evidence of increased abuse, but also as an indication of growing public awareness and reduced concealment. Addressing defilement therefore requires integrated interventions that combine poverty reduction, institutional strengthening, community sensitisation, survivor support, and transformation of harmful social norms in order to strengthen child protection systems in Zambia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends a coordinated multi-sectoral approach involving government institutions, traditional leaders, schools, churches, civil society organizations, and community members to strengthen child protection systems in Zambia. Government should decentralize child protection services through increased establishment of Victim Support Units, One Stop Centres, and fast-track courts in rural communities to improve access to justice and survivor support. Strengthening psychosocial services, trauma-informed counselling, and school-based child protection programmes is equally necessary to support survivors and encourage disclosure.

Traditional and religious leaders should intensify community sensitisation programmes aimed at challenging harmful cultural beliefs, stigma, victim-blaming, child marriages, and informal settlements of defilement cases. Parents and guardians should further strengthen communication, supervision, and child safety awareness within households to improve early disclosure and prevention of abuse. Non-governmental organizations and

child protection stakeholders should expand economic empowerment initiatives targeting vulnerable households while increasing awareness regarding child protection laws and reporting procedures. The study contributes to knowledge by demonstrating that rising reported defilement cases may reflect both actual increases in abuse and greater community willingness to disclose previously concealed cases.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its significant contributions, the study faced several limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted in selected communities within Mungwi District, which limits generalization of the findings to other districts or provinces in Zambia where cultural practices, institutional systems, and socioeconomic conditions may differ. Secondly, the study employed a qualitative research design that relied heavily on participants' narratives and lived experiences. While this approach generated rich and detailed insights, some responses may have been affected by social desirability bias, fear, stigma, or reluctance to discuss sensitive issues related to sexuality and abuse openly. Additionally, the sensitive nature of defilement may have limited the depth of disclosure among some participants, particularly regarding family involvement, informal settlements, and experiences of abuse. Institutional records obtained from police, health facilities, and One Stop Centres may also contain inconsistencies and underreported cases, thereby affecting completeness of available data. However, triangulation of interviews and institutional sources strengthened the credibility of the findings. Future research should undertake comparative studies between rural and urban communities to examine differences in reporting practices, stigma, and institutional responses. Further studies should also explore survivors' lived experiences of trauma, disclosure, and access to justice using survivor-centred approaches. Quantitative and longitudinal studies are additionally needed to investigate the prevalence of informal settlements, evolving reporting patterns, and the influence of social media, alcohol abuse, pornography, and digital technologies on child vulnerability and sexual exploitation in Zambia.

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