



BREAKING THE SILENCE: A DICHOTOMY PREVALENCE AND PROTECTION CHALLENGES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract:

This analysis, titled "Breaking the Silence: A Dichotomy of Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence and Protection Challenges in Zambia," examines the trends and challenges associated with child sexual abuse in Zambia from 2017 to 2023. The study aims to explore the prevalence of child sexual abuse over the specified period and evaluate the effectiveness of Zambia's legal framework in protecting children from such abuse. Utilising a qualitative research design, the methodology involved document analysis of Zambia Police Victim Support Unit reports and an assessment of the legal framework. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS to identify trends and differences across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods, while qualitative content analysis was used to examine the legal context. The findings reveal fluctuating abuse rates, with notable increases in 2019 and persistently high levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gender disparities were observed, with girls disproportionately affected. The study highlights significant gaps in the legal framework, including inadequate protection for

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older adolescents and limited statutory definitions of abuse. Challenges such as cultural taboos, socio-economic issues, and legal inefficiencies continue to hinder effective child protection. The analysis stresses the need for enhanced reporting mechanisms and legal reforms to safeguard children better and address the complexities of child sexual abuse in Zambia.

Keywords: prevalence, challenges, child sexual abuse

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a significant and pervasive problem that affects millions of children worldwide. According to the World Health Organization, it is estimated that up to 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 18 (WHO, 2021). Research on child sexual abuse has gained significant attention in recent years due to its prevalence and the serious consequences it has for children's health and well-being. The study of child sexual abuse is complex and multifaceted, requiring a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates knowledge from various disciplines. Researchers have sought to understand the prevalence and nature of child sexual abuse, as well as the factors that contribute to its occurrence, the consequences for victims, and the best ways to prevent and treat it. The current study focused on trend analysis on the occurrence of reported cases of CSA and analysed the adequacy of the legal and policy framework in Zambia.

Understanding the global prevalence of child sexual abuse is a complex endeavor influenced by various factors, including underreporting, differences in definitions, and cultural disparities in reporting practices. Despite these challenges, data from reputable international organizations offer valuable insights into the scope of this issue. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 18% of women and 8% of men worldwide report experiencing sexual abuse during childhood (WHO, 2021). Similarly, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2020 report revealed alarming statistics regarding child sexual abuse worldwide. It is estimated that 1 in 8 children globally have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation at some point in their lives. The report further reveals that in Europe, the situation is no better, with an estimated 1 in 5 children falling victim to some form of sexual violence. Disturbingly, between 70% and 85% of child victims in Europe are reported to know their abuser, highlighting confirming the theory that the proximity of the perpetrators lies within the victims social circles.

In the United States, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that around 1 in 9 girls and 1 in 53 boys under the age of 18 have experienced sexual abuse or assault perpetrated by adults (CDC, 2020). While these statistics provide a snapshot of prevalence rates in developed countries, it is crucial to recognize that child sexual abuse is a pervasive issue across diverse socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, Solehati *et al.* (2021) conducted a systematic literature review on child sexual abuse in Asia. The findings revealed wide-ranging prevalence rates of child

sexual abuse (CSA) across genders and types of abuse. The prevalence rates in the study ranged from 2.2% to 94% for girls, while for boys, it varied from 1.7% to 49.5%. Non-contact abuse affected 12.6% to 56.5% of girls and 0.7% to 68.7% of boys, while contact abuse impacted 5.3% to 67.2% of girls and 2.2% to 53.3% of boys. Abuse rates where penetration took place ranged from 0.5% to 88.24% for girls and 1.7% to 57.1% for boys.

Similarly, Selengia, Thuy & Mushi's (2020) study on the prevalence and patterns of child sexual abuse in selected countries of Asia and Africa revealed similar results. In Asia, the prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) varies significantly across different regions. Among females, prevalence rates range from 3.3% to 42.7% in China and India, respectively, and from 1.8% to 28.7% for non-contact abuse in these same countries. In Hong Kong and Sri Lanka, prevalence rates for males range from 4.3% to 58%. The rates for contact CSA among females in China and India range from 1.9% to 59.2%, while for males in China, they range from 1.8% to 9.1%. Similarly, the rates for non-contact abuse among males in China range from 3.1% to 29.4%.

Most victims experienced their first exposure to CSA during preteen years, with a significant proportion of violations occurring within the victim's home (6.1% to 41.9%). Importantly, the study highlighted that most CSA perpetrators were known to the victims. For example, statistics show that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys globally have been subjected to sexual abuse during their youth (UNICEF, 2020).

Child sexual abuse is thus a global problem that affects millions of children worldwide. In some countries where child sexual abuse is more prevalent, it appears to be exacerbated by factors such as poverty, lack of education, and cultural norms that condone or overlook abuse. For example, in India, a study found that 53% of children reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse (Pandey *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, a study found that up to 25% of girls and 10% of boys reported experiencing sexual violence (Jewkes *et al.*, 2009).

Child sexual abuse is a serious problem in Asia, but due to cultural taboos and the lack of adequate reporting mechanisms in place, it is often underreported despite various factors preventing the reporting of CSA—studies by WHO confirm its occurrence in many countries in Asia. The World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a multi-country study in 2006, which found that the prevalence of sexual violence before the age of 18 ranged from 3% to 23% among females and 1% to 16% among males in Asia. (WHO, 2006). These statistics do not appear to have changed significantly to date, as evidenced below.

In Vietnam, Tran *et al.* (2016) study results revealed that 8.5% of children aged 12-17 reported experiencing sexual abuse in their lifetime). Moreover, a study conducted in Malaysia by Rosli *et al.* (2016) found that 25.8% of female university students reported experiencing some form of sexual abuse during their lifetime. (Rosli *et al.*, 2016). In China, Fang *et al.*'s (2015) study found that approximately 21% of children aged 6-17 had experienced some form of sexual abuse. In Pakistan, Shah *et al.* (2018) also found that 37% of children aged 5-16 had experienced some form of sexual abuse, with girls being more likely to be victims than boys. In Thailand, Sittitrai (2019) and colleagues conducted a

study in 2019, and the results reveal that 27% of female university students reported experiencing sexual harassment or assault, with 7% reporting having been raped. Similarly, a study conducted in the Philippines in 2020 found that 32% of Filipino adolescents aged 13-17 had experienced sexual violence, with 7% having experienced sexual violence within the past year (Alampay *et al.*, 2020). In India, a study conducted by Gupta *et al.* (2017) also reported the occurrence of CSA that 53.22% of the children surveyed reported experiencing sexual abuse, with girls being more likely to report abuse than boys (Gupta *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, the scourge of child sexual abuse in Africa has been on the increase, with many children being sexually abused every year. Although CSA is detected in all countries across the globe, research suggests that child sexual abuse is most prevalent in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2014). Sub-Saharan Africa is a region with a high prevalence of child sexual abuse. The prevalence of child sexual abuse varies across countries in the region. However, studies indicate that it is a widespread problem. For example, a study conducted in Nigeria by Ezeanolue *et al.* in 2015 found that 24% of girls and 10% of boys reported experiencing sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Ezeanolue *et al.*, 2015). Another study conducted in Tanzania found that 28% of girls and 13% of boys reported experiencing sexual abuse before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2011).

In Zambia, there has been an increase in the occurrence of child sexual abuse in recent years, as reported by Matafwali *et al.* (2020) and Zambia Police (2019). A study conducted by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in Zambia found that 31% of girls and 16% of boys reported experiencing sexual violence before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2015). The study also revealed that the majority of perpetrators were known to the children, including family members, teachers, and religious leaders. Another study conducted by the Ministry of Gender and Child Development in Zambia found that the prevalence of sexual abuse among girls aged 15 to 24 was 31% (Ministry of Gender and Child Development, 2013). The study also reported that the majority of perpetrators were men, with 78% of victims reporting that the perpetrator was male. Thus, child sexual abuse is a pervasive problem that has devastating consequences for children and their families. While the problem is complex, understanding the complexity of CSA involves considering various factors, including its psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Research, such as the "four preconditions model" proposed by Finkelhor *et al.* (1990), highlights the interplay of motivation, inhibitors, and resistance factors contributing to instances of abuse. Moreover, the psychological impact of CSA on victims is profound, often resulting in trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and long-term mental health consequences.

Zambia has recognized the need for the legal protection of children from sexual abuse through the ratification and partial domestication of global and regional agreements that protect the rights of children, namely, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). Both the CRC and the ACRWC define a child as a person below the age of

eighteen, and they guarantee the protection of children from all forms of abuse, including sexual abuse (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), (African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990). In addition, both treaties impose an obligation on state parties to enact laws, and to formulate policies that protect children from sexual abuse. They have bestowed a responsibility on state parties to take necessary legislative, administrative, educational and social measures to ensure the protection of children from sexual abuse whilst they are under the care of a parent or guardian.

Thus, state parties to the two agreements, such as Zambia, have an obligation to provide a legal and regulatory framework for the protection of children from, and the prevention of, child sexual abuse. Based on this obligation, Zambia has taken legal measures to protect children from child sexual abuse through the enactment of various pieces of legislation for their protection. These include the Penal Code, the Gender-Based Violence Act, and the Children's Code. The legislation also provides for the administration of justice for the benefit of victims of child sexual abuse.

The principal statute for the protection of children from all forms of violence and abuse in Zambia is the Children's Code Act (2022), and it defines a child as a person who is eighteen years old or below. It is supplemented by the Penal Code and the Anti Gender Based Violence Act. Notably, these pieces of legislation do not expressly define child sexual abuse. The Children's Code has encompassed sexual abuse within the meaning of child abuse.

The Penal Code Act (1976) prohibits child sexual abuse through various offences, namely, defilement, rape, incest, unnatural offences, defilement of imbeciles, sexual harassment and indecent assault. The majority of the victims of child sexual abuse are girls (Akani *et al.*, 2015), and the most frequently reported form of abuse in police stations is defilement (Makasa & Heathfield, 2018).

The offences that constitute child sexual abuse in the Zambian Penal Code Act provide limited protection for children in Zambia. This is because a child, within the meaning of the said statute, is a person below the age of sixteen (Penal Code Act, 1976), which is contrary to the definition of a child, as provided in the Children's Code. Thus, children between the ages of 16 and 18 do not receive statutory protection from sexual abuse through the criminalization of the offenses. Female children between the ages of 16 and 18 may only be protected from child sexual abuse through the offence of rape, defined as the unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl without her consent or with consent that is obtained through threats (Penal Code Act, 1976). This is contrary to international standards for the protection of children from sexual abuse, which do not require the absence of consent for the offence of sexual abuse to occur.

Children receive additional legal protection from sexual abuse through the Anti Gender Based Violence Act (2011); it has categorised sexual abuse that results from violence against a child because of their gender as gender-based violence. However, the Anti Gender Based Violence Act also defines limited protection for children between the ages of 16 and 18 because it defines a child as a person below sixteen years.

Zambia has also subscribed to international standards for the protection of children from child sexual abuse. This is because countries that are state parties to the CRC have the responsibility to ensure that the staff operations and programs of child-related projects and institutions do not expose children to, or put them at risk of, child sexual abuse; they must be safe for children (The International Child Safeguarding Standards, 2022). The International Child Safeguarding Standards (ICSS) have provided minimum standards for the protection of children from the risk of harm or abuse in child-related projects and programs, and it defines 'harm' to include child sexual abuse (The International Child Safeguarding Standards, 2022).

In this regard, various policies and guidelines have been formulated for the protection of children. The National Child Policy and the National Child Safeguarding Framework were formulated to address existing challenges that are faced by Zambian children (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, 2021) by drawing from international and regional instruments on the rights of children, with the view to promote their rights and welfare. Despite the existence of these measures for the protection of children, child sexual abuse has remained a challenging issue in Zambia. Studies have revealed that the Zambia Police Service has continued to record increases in the number of reports of offences of child sexual abuse, which include defilement, rape, incest, unnatural offences and defilement of imbeciles (Makasa & Heathfield, 2018).

The Children's Code (2022) has empowered the Minister of Community Development and Social Services to develop and implement programs for the protection of victims of child sexual abuse in Zambia, with help from relevant government departments and institutions. Child-related projects and programs are implemented pursuant to the guidelines in the Child Protection Policy and the Child Safeguarding Policy. The Policies are designed to protect children from sexual abuse, among other things.

Child sexual abuse is an insidious act by its nature that, once discovered, can have differing impacts on a victim, the perpetrator, the family or families involved and the society at large. The challenges of protecting victims of child sexual abuse from abuse are, at its simplest, complex and broad and involve an array of facets, including the politics of gender, economic status and social-cultural norms and practices to name but a few. The way society deals with the outcomes of sexual abuse is very much determined by a particular society's culture and worldview. Culture, in its simplest form, can be broken down into traditions, customs, morals, beliefs, and social norms, to name but a few.

This section of the work will endeavour to address some of the problems associated with cultural viewpoints and how they relate to protecting victims of child sexual abuse in Zambia. These include but are not limited to the following areas: taboo surrounding issues relating to discussion of sexuality; cultural beliefs on having sex with children; child sex and wealth creation; curing disease; patriarchy and the role of women in society; socio-economic challenges; legal challenges and gaps; unreported or late reporting of sexual abuse cases; fear of family and community breakdown; fear of losing

marriage; fear of the abused child not getting married; fear of bringing shame to the children and the family, fear of isolation, problems with interventions and so on.

In many societies, including Zambia, open discussion about sexuality is deemed to be a taboo subject. Strong cultural taboos thus surround topics concerning sex, as parents are often concerned that providing such information to underage children may lead them to experiment prematurely with sex (Bastien *et al.*, 2011). This challenge has also been confirmed by work done by Isaksen *et al.* (2020). While the study was to reduce the risk of early pregnancy, STIs, HIV, and other sexual challenges, and not child sexual abuse *per se*, it found that communication between parents and children can also assist with the identification and prevention of sexual abuse when parents are able to openly and positively communicate with their children about the dangers of sexual abuse and how to avoid being a victim. However, whether parents communicate with their children about sexual issues is affected by several issues that fall in the category of social and cultural norms and the misconceived ideas on the effects of communicating with children about sex based on cultural myths and old wives tales, often based on non-scientific information (Isaksen *et al.*, 2020).

Some of the cultural beliefs that are perpetrated in some societies include the belief that men cannot stay without having intercourse for long periods. In other cultures, such as the Masai culture, prepubescent girls are used for sexual practice because they cannot get pregnant (Talle, 1994). In the Masai culture, this practice is not frowned upon or considered sexual abuse. There appears to be no evidence indicating that similar practices occur in Zambia.

Research conducted by Chilensi - Sakala (2012) shows that over 90 percent of respondents held that it was a common traditional practice for men to sexually abuse underage girls under the mistaken belief that it would lead them to become rich or successful in business. A CamFed (2011) report quoting a VSU Coordinator-CDC states that "*people believe that having sex with a minor will help them to grow their business, they have sex with children aged 8 to 18 so that their business can grow in 10 years and by the time the girl is 18 years she is too old. They look for another minor to have sex with.*"

It has also been found by different researchers like Chilensi - Sakala (2012) and Lema (2022) that there are beliefs enshrined within some traditional societies in Zambia that HIV /AIDs can be cured by having intercourse with a virgin youth. This belief is often found to be perpetrated by traditional healers (Murray *et al.*, 2006); (Epstein & Jewkes, 2009). Alternatively, according to Chilensi - Sakala (2012), there is also evidence to suggest the strongly held view by some communities that virgins are less likely to be HIV positive and thus become a target for sexual abuse by men who fear being infected by the virus. Additionally, cleansing practices were also identified as possible sources of widespread abuse (Meursing *et al.*, 1995). It is likely that where these cleansing practices called *ukupyana* are prevalent, there is very little openness about them in the community and more often than not, they are carried out by a select group of elders called *bana chimbusa* who are tasked with carrying out the practice in secret.

Widespread sexual violence in Zambia is rooted in the persistent cultural, religious and historical institutions of oppression against women, according to feminists and other schools of thought. According to Makasa and Heathfield (2018), structures and attitudes that sustain violence against women can be traced back to the cultural underpinnings in Zambia, where the male child is favoured over a female child, who is seen mainly as being a cost rather than an asset. This socio-economic inequality makes reporting sexual crimes very difficult. According to Muzyamba's discussions with women has also been shown that the prevalence of HIV was due to high rates of rape within close family groups and entrenched male-to-woman domination both sexually and socially (Muzyamba, 2021).

There is generally a cultural norm when it comes to the communication of sex between men and women that a woman is not obliged to say 'yes' to sexual advances from men. Culturally, when approached for intercourse by a man, a woman, even if she wants to engage in coitus with the man, must say 'no' as a means of preserving her dignity as a chaste and respectable woman. Men are thus taught to interpret a woman's rejection of their advances as meaning that the woman is willing to go ahead but just playing hard to get and under these misconceptions, men are thus willing to exercise some level of force to obtain a woman's consent. This cultural practice normally facilitates the rape of women of any age. Rape itself is traditionally blamed on the woman as looking for it. According to Meursing *et al.* (1995), the problem is further exacerbated when considering relationships between young girls and older men, as young girls are traditionally bound to obey older men. Added to this, the vestiges of patriarchy that emphasizes obedience to adults by children and the supremacy of males over females allow men to have double authority over girls of all ages. This ideal is further compounded by a general belief and cultural acceptance that perpetuates the ideal of the urgency of male sexual relief, which states that a man cannot go more than seven days without copulating and that, traditionally, it is a woman's role to satisfy this impulse whenever they are approached by a man, together with a tolerance and expectancy of the use of physical coercion to obtain it as seen above (Meursing *et al.*, 1995). Thus, the socialization of obedience to elders, especially to males, by females of all ages, heightens their vulnerability to abuse by men as a result.

Based on the background, it can be inferred that supporting research on child sexual abuse is vital as it enhances our understanding of its causes, prevalence, and impacts, which is essential for crafting effective prevention and intervention strategies. This research identifies gaps in current policies and practices, informs the development of targeted solutions, and raises awareness among the public and professionals, leading to early detection and intervention. It also contributes to creating better support systems for survivors, helping them access necessary care and resources. Ultimately, this research advocates for stronger legal frameworks and societal changes, helping to eliminate the stigma and silence associated with the practice, and ensuring a safer environment for children.

2 Statement of the Problem

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive problem in Zambia, with rates of abuse estimated to be as high as 31% (Fulu *et al.*, 2018). Despite the existence of legal frameworks designed to protect children from sexual abuse, the extent to which the implementation and enforcement of these laws are inadequate (MCDSS, 2016). For instance, the Anti-Gender Based Violence Act (2011), which criminalizes sexual offenses and establishes guidelines for reporting and prosecuting cases of abuse, has been criticized for its limited scope and for not adequately addressing the specific needs of child victims. Similarly, the Children's Act provides for the protection of children from abuse and exploitation, but its implementation has been hampered by a lack of resources and trained personnel (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The widespread prevalence of child sexual abuse, coupled with the inadequate implementation and enforcement of protective laws, leaves children in Zambia—much like in other parts of the world—vulnerable to harm and deprived of the justice and protection they rightfully deserve. It is against this backdrop that ongoing research on child sexual abuse is crucial for developing effective intervention strategies.

3. Objectives

- 1) To analyse the trends in the occurrence of child sexual abuse in Zambia from 2017 to 2023
- 2) To analyse the adequacy of the legal framework in the protection of children from sexual abuse

3.1 Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in reported cases of child sexual abuse before, during, and after the pandemic.

4. Materials and Methods

The methodology section outlines the approach used to analyze reported cases of child sexual abuse in Zambia from 2017 to 2023. It details the methods employed for data collection, including document analysis of Zambia Police Victim Support Unit reports and examination of the legal framework on child protection. This section provides a clear understanding of the research process, ensuring transparency and replicability. A systematic approach was used to collect and analyze these reports, ensuring comprehensive coverage of reported cases of child sexual abuse. The quantitative analysis of reported cases of child abuse from 2017 to 2023 was conducted using SPSS version 28 to analyze the reported cases of abuse across different periods: before, during, and after the pandemic. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were generated to summarize the distribution of reported abuse cases at each time. One-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was employed to determine whether there were

statistically significant differences in the mean frequencies of reported abuse cases among the three time periods. Assumptions underlying the use of ANOVA, such as independence of observations, homogeneity of variances, and normality of data, were assessed to ensure the validity of the analysis. Post hoc tests, Games-Howell test, were conducted to identify specific pairwise differences between periods following significant ANOVA results. The Games-Howell test compares all possible pairs of means and provides adjusted p-values for each comparison, taking into account the unequal variances between groups. This allows us to identify specific time periods that differ significantly in terms of reported cases of child abuse. Statistical significance was determined using a predetermined alpha level (e.g., $\alpha = 0.05$), indicating the threshold for rejecting the null hypothesis. In addition to quantitative analysis, qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze textual data obtained from document analysis of the examination of the legal framework on child protection. Themes on the legal context of child protection were identified through systematic coding and categorization of textual data. Comparative analysis techniques were used to explore changes in reported cases of abuse over time and to assess the impact of the legal framework on child protection. Qualitative findings were integrated with quantitative results to comprehensively understand the phenomenon under investigation. Ethical principles, including confidentiality and respect for participants' rights, were upheld throughout the research process. Permission was obtained from relevant authorities to access and analyze the Zambia Police Victim Support Unit reports and legal documents.

5. Results

The study provides valuable insights into the incidence of child sexual abuse in Zambia from 2017 to 2023 and assesses the adequacy of the legal framework to protect children from such abuse. Aim one focused on analyzing patterns and changes in the abuse prevalence of CSA. Objective two assessed the adequacy of existing legal mechanisms, policies, and enforcement in protecting children. The study examined relevant legislation and identified strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.

Table 1: Trends Analysis in the Reported Cases of Child Abuse and Child Sexual Abuse in Zambia from 2017 to 2023

Year	Reported Cases of Child Abuse	Reported Cases of Child Sexual Abuse	Proportion of Child Sexual Abuse (%)
2017	6494	2373	36.55
2018	6085	2684	44.10
2019	9543	2678	28.05
2020	8473	2658	31.37
2021	7588	2330	30.70
2022	9166	2833	30.90
2023	9107	2881	31.64

Trend analysis of reported child abuse cases between 2017 and 2023 shows significant pattern shifts before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2017 to 2018, there was a slight decrease in reported cases from 6,494 to 6,085, a decrease of 3.2%. However, from 2018 to 2019, there was a significant increase, with reported cases increasing from 6,085 to 9,543, a significant increase of 22.1%. There was a slight decrease in reported cases at the start of 2020, falling from 9,543 to 8,473, a decrease of 6%. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, there was a striking decrease in reported child abuse cases from 8,473 to 7,588, a significant decrease of 6%. This decline highlights apparent changes in the prevalence of such incidents during the pandemic. However, the post-pandemic period in 2022 saw an increase in reported cases from 7,588 to 9,166, an increase of 9%. This increase suggests possible factors contributing to increased vulnerability or improved reporting mechanisms post-pandemic. In 2023, there was a slight decrease in reported cases from 9,166 to 9,107, a decrease of 0.3% compared to the previous year.

The analysis reveals several key trends in the reported cases of child sexual abuse relative to overall child abuse cases. The proportion of child sexual abuse cases varies significantly year by year, with the highest proportion observed in 2018 at 44.10% and the lowest in 2019 at 28.05%. After peaking in 2018, the proportion decreased in 2019 and has generally stabilized around 30-31% from 2020 onwards. These consistently high proportions indicate that child sexual abuse remains a significant issue within the broader context of child abuse. Despite fluctuations, nearly one-third of all reported child abuse cases involve sexual abuse, highlighting the critical need for focused interventions and effective implementation of protective measures.

Figure 1: Reported Cases of Child Sexual Abuse from 2017 to 2023

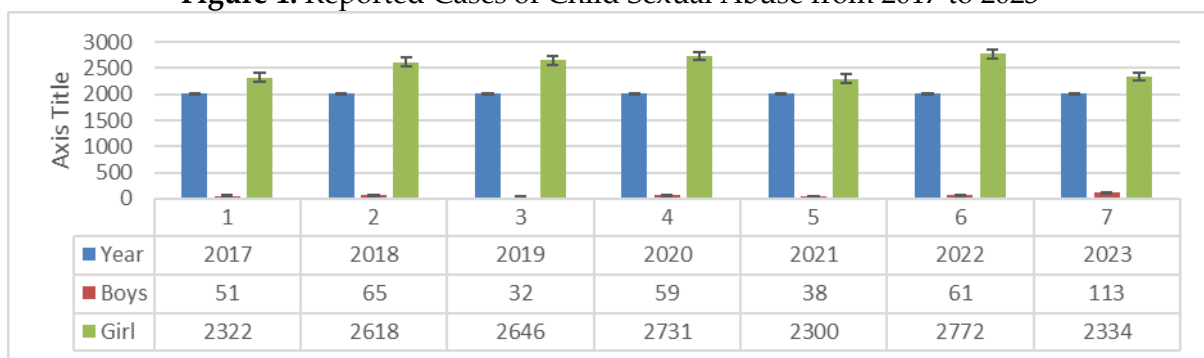


Figure 1 above shows the reported cases of child sexual abuse from 2017 to 2023. In 2017, of the total 23,373 reported cases of child sexual abuse (CSA), 51 cases (2%) involved boys, while 22,322 cases (98%) involved girls. In 2018, 2,684 cases of child sexual abuse were reported, with 65 cases (2%) affecting boys and 2,618 cases (98%) affecting girls. In 2019, out of a total of 2,678 reported cases of CSA, 32 cases (1%) involved boys and 2,646 cases (99%). Girl. In 2020, 2,758 cases of CSA were reported, with 59 cases (2%) affecting boys and 2,731 cases (98%) affecting girls. In 2021, out of a total of 2,338 reported cases of CSA, 38 cases (2%) affected boys, and 2,300 cases (98%) affected girls. In 2022,

2,833 cases of CSA were reported, with 61 cases (2%) involving boys and 2,772 cases (98%) affecting girls. A total of 2,881 cases of CSA were reported, with 113 cases (4%) involving boys and 2,334 cases (96%) affected girls. These numbers and percentages underscore the ongoing trend of girls being disproportionately affected by child sexual abuse compared to boys throughout the years analyzed. There's a significant gender disparity in reported cases, with girls consistently comprising the majority of cases (ranging from 96% to 99%). The percentage of boys involved in reported cases remains relatively low compared to girls, ranging from 1% to 4%.

Table 2: One-way ANOVA multiple comparisons of reported Child Sexual Abuse from 2017 to 2023

Period 1	Period 2	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
2018-2019 Before COVID-19	2020-2021 During the pandemic	-0.574*	0.007	0.000
2018-2019 Before COVID-19	2022-2023 Post COVID-19	-1.000*	0.000	
2020-2021 During the pandemic	2018-2019 Before COVID-19	0.574*	0.007	0.000
2020-2021 During the pandemic	2022-2023 Post COVID-19	-0.426*	0.007	0.000
2022-2023 Post COVID-19	2018-2019 Before COVID-19	1.000*	0.000	
2022-2023 Post COVID-19	2020-2021 During the pandemic	0.426*	0.007	0.000

Table 2 above shows the one-way ANOVA followed by post-hoc multiple comparisons using the Games-Howell test conducted to compare the reported cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) before, during, and after the pandemic. To further explain these differences, incorporating mean differences, standard errors, significance levels (p-values), and confidence intervals. Post-hoc multiple comparisons revealed significant differences in reported cases of CSA across all pairs of periods ($p < .0001$ for all). Results from 2018-2019 Before COVID-19 vs. 2020-2021 During the pandemic: Mean difference = -0.574, $p < .0001$ 2018-2019 Before COVID-19 vs. 2022-2023 Post COVID-19: Mean difference = -1.000, $p < .0001$ 2020-2021 During the pandemic vs. 2022-2023 Post COVID-19: Mean difference = -0.426, $p < .0001$.

Comparing CSA scores between the years 2018-2019, before the pandemic, and 2020-2021, during the pandemic, yielded a statistically significant decrease in CSA scores during the pandemic period. The mean difference between these periods was found to be -0.574, with a standard error of 0.007 and a highly significant p-value of less than 0.001. This suggests a notable reduction in reported cases of child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the period preceding it.

Similarly, comparing CSA scores between the pandemic period (2020-2021) and the post-pandemic period (2022-2023) also resulted in a statistically significant difference,

with CSA scores decreasing further in the post-pandemic period. The mean difference between these periods was -1.000, with a standard error of 0.000 and a highly significant p-value of less than 0.001. This indicates a continued decline in reported cases of child sexual abuse even after the pandemic. Furthermore, when comparing CSA scores between the pre-pandemic period (2018-2019) and the post-pandemic period (2022-2023), there was a statistically significant increase in CSA scores in the post-pandemic period. The mean difference between these periods was 1.000, with a standard error of 0.000 and a highly significant p-value of less than 0.001. This suggests a rebound effect, with reported cases of child sexual abuse increasing above pre-pandemic levels in the years following the pandemic. Therefore, these findings highlight the dynamic nature of reported cases of child sexual abuse before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The statistically significant differences in mean CSA scores reveal fluctuations in prevalence over time, necessitating ongoing vigilance and intervention efforts to safeguard vulnerable children and address the complex challenges associated with child sexual abuse. Based on the ANOVA and post-hoc tests, we reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in reported cases of child sexual abuse before, during, and after the pandemic. The results suggest that the occurrence of CSA varied significantly across these periods.

4. Discussion

The discussion section of this article highlights significant trends in the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Zambia, underscoring the urgent need for robust legal and policy frameworks to protect children. Despite the existence of the Anti Gender Based Violence Act (2011) and the Children's Act, our analysis reveals substantial gaps in implementation and enforcement, primarily due to limited resources and trained personnel. The inadequacies of these frameworks have left many child victims without adequate protection and justice. Additionally, the specific needs of child victims are often overlooked, further exacerbating their vulnerability. This research emphasizes the necessity for comprehensive reforms, including increased funding, enhanced training for law enforcement and social workers, and community-driven initiatives to raise awareness and support for child protection. By addressing these challenges, Zambia can create a safer environment for its children and ensure that legal provisions effectively safeguard their rights and well-being.

Analysis of trends in reported child abuse cases from 2017 to 2023 provides valuable insights into the fluctuations and potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child protection systems. Prior to the pandemic, there were fluctuations in reported cases, with ups and downs over the years. In particular, the significant increase in reported cases in 2019, representing approximately 17.2% of the total, could be due to increased awareness or improved reporting mechanisms. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought unprecedented challenges, including disruptions to social services, school closures, and increased burdens on families, all of which may

have impacted the reporting and detection of child abuse (Matafwali *et al.*, 2023). Despite these challenges, the number of reported cases remained relatively high in 2020, at approximately 15.3%, suggesting that child abuse continued to be reported despite the impact of the pandemic. Fluctuations continued in subsequent years 2021, 2022 and 2023, indicating continued challenges in maintaining consistent reporting in light of changing circumstances. In the wake of COVID-19, as societies recover and adapt to new norms, it is critical to reassess and strengthen child protection systems to ensure resilience to future crises while addressing any gaps exacerbated by the pandemic. This requires proactive measures such as improving virtual reporting mechanisms, providing support services to families experiencing economic hardship, and prioritizing the well-being of vulnerable children in policy and legal frameworks (Smith *et al.*, 2020; Johnson & Williams, 2018; UNICEF, 2021).

The analysis of reported cases of child sexual abuse to VSU also shows gender differences. By comparison, only 10 per cent of 2021 of reports about boys were related to sexual abuse. The analysis indicates that the majority of the victims of sexual abuse were girls. The persistent occurrence of child sexual abuse despite movement restrictions highlights a worrying aspect reported in various CSA studies by Katz and Field (2022) and Scurich (2023), confirming that perpetrators of child sexual abuse are often people known to the child. This suggests that the home environment, normally considered a place of safety, can paradoxically become a breeding ground for abuse. The critical analysis highlights the complexity of child sexual abuse in intimate settings, even in times of heightened vulnerability, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the results reporting that many girls are exposed to child abuse as compared to boys, the extent to which these observed differences are related to actual variations in patterns of risk exposure by sex should be investigated as suggested by Mraovich and Wilson (1999) as this could be due to underreporting about violence among males, especially when it comes to certain forms of sexual abuse. These results are similar to what Sserwanja, Kawuki and Kim (2021) reported in Uganda that the majority of the reported cases involved child neglect, physical and sexual abuse.

Prosecuting child sex offenders presents a myriad of complex challenges that hinder the effective delivery of justice and protection for victims. These challenges encompass a range of issues, including that include the following:

A. Inadequate Legal Framework and Enforcement

Although Zambia has established laws to address child sexual abuse, such as the Penal Code and the Child Protection Act, significant gaps in these legal provisions and their enforcement undermine the effectiveness of the legal system (Human Rights Watch, 2019). According to a report by CamFed (2011), the law was viewed negatively as it was seen to be unwilling to prosecute abusers, especially in rural settings. Representatives of the Victim Support Unit (VSU) counter this assertion with some of the problems that they face in bringing the victim to book due to the fact that it is difficult to get enough evidence to bring the perpetrator to trial. Included in this is the high cost of clinical services for

cases like rape and defilement. They also admitted to and complained of the fact that sometimes there may be powerful social pressures not to report cases. This is corroborated by many of victims of sexual abuse who view the police as costly, corrupt, and impersonal, given the sensitivity of the crime (Chitundu *et al.*, 2020). Specific challenges include a lack of clarity and comprehensiveness in the definitions of sexual abuse, which can lead to inconsistent application of the laws (Zambia Law Development Commission, 2021). Furthermore, the practical implementation of legal and policy frameworks remains problematic. The research conducted by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare in conjunction with UNICEF (2016) highlights that, while the legislative and policy frameworks for child and family welfare are robust on paper, their real-world application is fraught with difficulties. The absence of comprehensive, cross-sectoral Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) impedes the standardization and formalization of referral pathways, service provision, and case feedback. Additionally, although roles and responsibilities for case management actors are generally defined, the broad range of services assigned to District Social Welfare Offices presents operational challenges. The challenges in Zambia's legal and policy framework for addressing child sexual abuse include vague legal definitions, inconsistent application, lack of standardized procedures, and operational inefficiencies. However, forthcoming policies and legislation related to social work, community volunteers, and community development offer an opportunity to address these issues by realigning roles, formalizing multi-sectoral coordination, and improving service delivery and quality. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of the legal and policy frameworks in protecting vulnerable children and adolescents.

B. Limited Resources and Capacity

The prosecution of child sex offences requires substantial resources, including forensic analysis, psychological support, and legal expertise. However, many institutions involved in child protection and prosecution in Zambia operate under severe resource constraints (World Bank, 2021). Forensic facilities may be under-equipped, and there is often a lack of funding for comprehensive victim support services, including counseling and medical care (UNICEF, 2020).

These limitations pose a significant challenge to the prosecution of child sex offenders, as insufficient financial resources hinder essential aspects such as forensic analysis, victim support services, and case management (World Bank, 2021). Additionally, the inadequacy of advanced forensic facilities compromises the quality of evidence collection and analysis, further obstructing the prosecution process (UNICEF, 2020).

C. Unreported or Late Reporting of Sexual Abuse Cases

Bowman and Brundige (2014) posit that child sexual abuse within the family is extremely prevalent yet vastly underreported in sub-Saharan Africa, mainly as a result of poor or inadequate state responses, characterized by outdated laws and legal procedures and

scarce mental health services and lack of resources for enforcement officers. Makasa & Heathfield (2018) further point out that in their 2018 work, an average of 18 women were raped in a population of 15 million people. This appears to corroborate the idea that in Zambia, women are reluctant to report abuse cases for fear of appearing tainted or damaged goods. Matafwali's (2016) study on the nature of counseling provided to sexually abused children in Victim Support Units also revealed significant underreporting of child sexual abuse cases. The study concluded that the majority of cases are not reported to the relevant authorities, and what is reported is just the tip of the iceberg.

D. Fear of Family and Community Breakdown

Traditionally, culture is reflected in the collective culture of people in a community and the influence that society has on the decision-making of the individuals in the group. Often called the spirit of ubuntu in South Africa, variations of this theme in Zambia normally create a situation where people in the community care more about what society thinks about them than about their own personal benefits. This theme constitutes the following sub-themes:

a. Fear of Losing Marriage

This theme reflects the importance that society places on marriage in a community. Married women are thus respected, unlike unmarried women who are not respected socially. Because of this, women protect their marriages by avoiding divorce or separation at all costs. Additionally, women at their coming-of-age initiation, normally called '*Chisungu*', are taught to keep what goes on in their marital home a secret. This plays out in terms of what happens when a female child is defiled in the household and whether the mother should report the matter to the police or not. She points out that reporting the matter to the police may result in the dissolution of her marriage, so in most instances, women choose not to report the abuse in an attempt to keep their marriage. Women will also avoid reporting the matter to the police because the community may laugh at them (Chitundu *et al.*, 2020). Apart from that, there is a tendency not to report the matter to the police because the police are considered not to keep things private. As such, reporting an incident may expose the child and latter on affect the child's prospects of finding a suitor in the community.

b. Fear of Bringing Shame to the Children and the Family

Fear of bringing shame to the children and the family significantly impacts the decision of women to report incidents of sexual abuse to authorities. The potential for public embarrassment and stigma can be overwhelming, leading women to avoid disclosing abuse to protect their families from judgment and blame (Human Rights Watch, 2019). This fear often stems from the psychological implications of being perceived as a negligent parent, which can exacerbate feelings of shame and inadequacy. Women may internalize this shame, leading to psychological distress such as anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation (Amado, Arce & Herraiz, 2015).). The pressure to avoid social

ostracization can deter them from seeking help, thereby allowing the abuse to remain unaddressed and increasing the risk of further trauma for both the child and the mother (UNICEF, 2020).

c. Fear of Isolation by Sexually Abused Girls

The fear of isolation experienced by sexually abused girls often compels their mothers to avoid reporting the abuse. This avoidance is influenced by several factors, including cultural stigma, social repercussions, and psychological impacts. In many cultures, there is a deeply ingrained belief that a child who has been abused is tainted and should be avoided by others (Sleggh *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, when a community becomes aware of a child abuse case, it is likely to respond adversely, often prohibiting its children from interacting with the abused child due to concerns that such contact might lead to the adoption of undesirable behaviors. As a result, mothers frequently refrain from reporting these incidents to the authorities. This stigma can lead to severe social ostracism, where parents may prevent their children from associating with the abused child due to fears of 'contamination' or adopting 'bad manners' (Richter & Rama, 2009).

Beyond cultural factors, there are systemic issues at play. The lack of support systems and resources for abused children can exacerbate the fear of isolation. Mothers may perceive reporting as futile if there is no adequate support or intervention from authorities (Gordon *et al.*, 2021; Edoh-Torgah & Matafwali, 2022). Furthermore, the trauma experienced by the child often goes unaddressed if the abuse is not reported, leading to long-term psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem (Miller *et al.*, 2016). This trauma can further isolate the child, as their behavioral and emotional difficulties may alienate them from peers and educators.

d. Stigmatisation of Girls Who Have Experienced Sexual Abuse or Pregnancy

Stigmatization of girls who have experienced sexual abuse or pregnancy is a significant issue that negatively impacts their well-being and educational outcomes. Victims often face mocking, shaming, or social exclusion from their peers, which exacerbates their trauma and leads to further isolation (Gibbs *et al.*, 2020; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012). This stigmatization affects adolescents in profound ways, causing them to avoid seeking sexual health information and services both in schools and health facilities (Morrison *et al.*, 2019). As a result, these girls are less likely to access critical healthcare resources, contributing to increased vulnerability to further health risks. Moreover, the stigma attached to their experiences often causes them to exclude themselves from school and other social or extracurricular activities, which can have lasting impacts on their education and personal development.

Research supports the damaging effects of stigmatization. Gibson and Leitenberg (2001) found that stigma and discrimination significantly affect a student's self-esteem, leading to poor academic performance. The psychological toll of stigma not only diminishes students' sense of self-worth but also increases the likelihood of absenteeism. In more severe cases, students may drop out of school entirely due to the overwhelming

shame and isolation they experience. This is particularly true for girls who have experienced sexual abuse or pregnancy, as the fear of judgment from peers and educators compounds the difficulties they already face. Stigmatization, therefore, creates barriers to education and health services, further entrenching gender inequalities and reducing the life chances of already vulnerable girls.

5.1 Conclusion

The analysis of trends in reported child sexual abuse cases in Zambia from 2017 to 2023 highlights significant fluctuations, with a notable increase in 2019 likely due to heightened awareness and improved reporting mechanisms. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 presented unprecedented challenges, disrupting social services, closing schools, and increasing family burdens, all of which likely impacted the reporting and detection of child abuse. Despite these challenges, the high number of reported cases in 2020 indicates that child abuse continues to be a critical issue. The persistent gender differences, with a higher prevalence of abuse among girls, and the prevalence of abuse within intimate settings underscore the complexity of child sexual abuse. Legal and policy frameworks in Zambia, although comprehensive, have gaps, particularly in the protection of children. The analysis also highlights cultural, socio-economic, and legal challenges in protecting victims of child sexual abuse, indicating a need for robust and multi-faceted interventions. Child sexual abuse remains a pervasive and deeply troubling issue globally, with significant implications for the well-being and development of affected children. Despite increasing awareness and efforts to address the issue, the prevalence of child sexual abuse varies widely across different regions and cultures, often influenced by a range of factors, including socio-economic conditions, cultural beliefs, and legal frameworks. In Zambia, the situation is particularly concerning as recent reports indicate a rising incidence of child sexual abuse, highlighting critical gaps in both the legal and policy responses designed to protect vulnerable children. This backdrop highlights the need for a focused examination of the existing legal and policy frameworks and their adequacy in addressing the persistent challenges associated with child sexual abuse in the Zambian context.

5.2 Recommendations

- 1) Improve virtual reporting mechanisms for easier and more confidential child abuse reporting.
- 2) Strengthen support services for families to reduce economic-related abuse risks.
- 3) Enhance legal and policy frameworks to better protect children
- 4) Encourage open communication about sexuality between parents and children.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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