

A Scoping Review on the Psychosocial Effects of Sexual Abuse on the Girl Child in Sub-Saharan Africa



Tsholofelo Keikabile¹ , Frans Koketso Matlakala²  & Curwyn Mapaling³ 

¹ Department of Social Work, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa.

² Lifestyle Diseases Research Entity, Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University, South Africa.

³ Department of Psychology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse has become a global phenomenon. The statistics of sexual abuse of a girl child by relatives and/or other people known to the girl child are shocking. Various factors predispose a girl child to be susceptible to sexual abuse. As a result, the purpose of this study was to review the existing literature on the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on a girl child. The study used a scoping review guided by PRISMA-ScR guidelines. African Journals Online, Sabinet African Journals, EBSCOHost, PubMed, and ScienceDirect were used in the study to compile papers that were assessed for their coverage of the psychosocial impacts of child sexual abuse on girls between 2012 and 2023. The collected data was narratively analysed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that child sexual abuse has an impact on the mental health of the girl child which leads to their behavioural change. It further revealed that children are afraid to disclose sexual abuse as they fear secondary victimisation in the community. It was recommended that community awareness and education be organised to equip community members about the impact of stigmatisation on victims, and appropriate ways must be created to respond to the disclosure of sexual abuse. This study contributes to the academic field of child psychology and social work by offering a comprehensive analysis of the psychosocial impacts of child sexual abuse on girls in Sub-Saharan Africa, identifying gaps in current literature, and providing evidence-based recommendations for community and policy-level interventions. Its findings underscore the critical need for gender- and age-specific research and interventions to mitigate the profound effects of sexual abuse on vulnerable populations.

Correspondence

Tsholofelo Keikabile

Email:

hopet.keikabile@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Children are the future, the people who will replace the current generations. However, cases of child sexual abuse (CSA) are alarming globally as perpetrators dehumanise and violate their rights. As a result, children suffer at the hands of people that they are supposed to be a blessing to, and from people that are expected to protect them. Amongst the adversities that children face is child sexual abuse such that they are oppressed by older people who may also abuse them sexually. Children in their nature are vulnerable and need to be protected by their parents and the government. Engaging in any sexual activity with a child is deemed as a form of abuse because they are not physically nor mentally fit to consent and engage in the

activity. CSA has a lifelong effect on the life of the child that may last till adulthood. In this paper, the researchers present the psychosocial effects of CSA on the girl child, factors contributing to the CSA of the girl child, and lastly accentuate factors contributing to the non-disclosure of CSA in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

There is a constant increase in the rate of child abuse globally. The most recent crime statistics show that 392 children were killed in just 90 days in 2021, and another 394 survived attempted murder in South Africa.¹ This is affirmed by the World Health Organisation which averred that globally up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect.² In addition, Abbasi et.al. reported that child sexual abuse is a global phenomenon with millions of children globally affected by the phenomenon.³ Other authors have reported that children who experience sexual abuse often suffer from psychological consequences, including post-traumatic stress and trauma.⁴ This affects the livelihood of children. Given that most researchers do not disaggregate their findings, it is worth noting that some researchers have found that the psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse between a boy and girl child might be different due to sociocultural factors.⁵

Furthermore, a girl child is more vulnerable to sexual abuse compared to a boy child. Certain cultures often blame a girl child for being raped as she failed to adhere to cultural values.⁶ Mphatheni and colleagues argue that child sexual abuse entrenches inferiority in girls whilst promoting men's power in a patriarchal world.⁷ As a result, when a female child is raped, she might blame herself, develop anxiety around male figures and fail to disclose sexual abuse. This makes it hard for them to disclose when sexually abused because, in African communities, the issue of child sexual abuse is preferred to be resolved within the family setting.⁸ Children in their nature are vulnerable and deserve to be protected by both their caregivers and the government. Physical vulnerability and mental immaturity are what make children vulnerable and prone to child sexual abuse because they cannot protect themselves. According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, a child is someone under the age of 18 years. Though both children are vulnerable and need to be protected, girls are more physically vulnerable compared to boys which is what makes them more prone to sexual abuse.⁹

According to Mphatheni and colleagues, there are quantitative studies that have been conducted and prove the increase in the high rates of child sexual abuse.¹⁰ It is against this background, that this study aims to use the scoping review method to determine and examine the coverage of a body of literature on the psychosocial effect of sexual abuse on a girl child. This is because there is an enormous volume of literature that has been published on sexual abuse but the cases of sexual abuse on a girl child are still on the rise. With that objective in mind, the researchers reviewed existing publications to identify and explore gaps and/or strengths in order to provide recommendations for future studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Violence continues to be a very alarming issue affecting the well-being and functioning of children worldwide. The Saferspaces states that there are many ways in which children are exposed to violence,

¹ Sandisiwe Shoba, "Abused, Beaten, Neglected: South African Children Exposed to Horrific Levels of Violence," 2021, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-06-01-abused-beaten-neglected-south-african-children-exposed-to-horrific-levels-of-violence/>.

² World Health Organization, *Mental Health and COVID-19: Early Evidence of the Pandemic's Impact: Scientific Brief* (World Health Organization, 2022).

³ Maryam Ajilian Abbasi et al., "Child Maltreatment in the Worldwide: A Review Article," *Int J Pediatr* 3, no. 1–1 (2015): 353–65.

⁴ Ciarán O'Driscoll and Esther Flanagan, "Sexual Problems and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Following Sexual Trauma: A Meta-analytic Review," *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice* 89, no. 3 (September 9, 2016): 351–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/papt.12077>.

⁵ Catherine L Ward et al., "Sexual Violence against Children in South Africa: A Nationally Representative Cross-Sectional Study of Prevalence and Correlates," *The Lancet Global Health* 6, no. 4 (2018): e460–68.

⁶ Kevin Lalor, "Child Sexual Abuse in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Literature Review," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28, no. 4 (2004): 439–60.

⁷ Mandlenkosi Richard Mphatheni, Witness Maluleke, and Zipho Nomsasa Snyman, "Understanding the Dynamics Involved in Sexual Offences against Children in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 19, no. 2 (2021): 17875–82.

⁸ Ramona Alaggia, Delphine Collin-Vézina, and Rusan Lateef, "Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Disclosures: A Research Update (2000–2016)," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 20, no. 2 (April 23, 2019): 260–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017697312>.

⁹ Mphatheni, Maluleke, and Snyman, "Understanding the Dynamics Involved in Sexual Offences..."

¹⁰ Mphatheni, Maluleke, and Snyman, "Understanding the Dynamics Involved in Sexual Offences..."

including within the family environment where they are raised and, in the community, where they are living.¹¹ Children are often violated by people that they know and trust.¹² Violence undermines children's sense of self and violates their rights. About 300 million children aged 2 to 4 years worldwide experience violent discipline from their caregivers regularly, whilst 176 million children live with mothers who are victims of intimate partner violence.¹³ Whereas, 42% of children in South Africa have been subjected to some form of maltreatment (sexual, physical, emotional, or neglect), whilst 82% have been subjected to some form of violence, whether through criminal victimisation or exposure to family or community violence. This indicates that South Africa experiences a significant impact from violence against children, similar in scale to the global situation. Markwei and Osei-Hwedie (2019) state that Africa has the highest figures for child sexual abuse. South Africa had about 19.8% child sexual abuse rate as compared to the global average of 18% in 2019/2020.¹⁴ This means that over 24000 children were sexually abused in South Africa in 2019/2020 (Bhana, 2021).

Risk factors of child sexual abuse

In Africa, several cultural norms infringe on the rights of children due to the domination of cultural beliefs which sometimes permit the oppression of women and children by men.¹⁵ The myth about virgin girls curing Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) contributes to elders forcing themselves on children because they want to cure themselves.¹⁶ Victims of child sexual abuse are normally not able to disclose the abuse due to feelings of shame. This is because engaging in sexual activities at a young age or with family members is seen as taboo in many cultures, and parents are forbidden from talking to children about sex.¹⁷ This makes it difficult for children to disclose when they are being sexually violated. African children are taught to respect authority and obey instructions from elders.¹⁸ This practice can enable abusers who hold these beliefs to avoid accountability for their mistreatment of girls. Therefore, culture may be one of the risk factors that make girls vulnerable to sexual abuse and contribute to the high rate of sexual abuse in Africa.

Effects of sexual abuse on a girl child

The aftermath of sexual abuse is that it leaves children with psychosocial effects that change how they see and engage with their world.¹⁹ Children who have experienced sexual abuse often struggle to trust their friends and family members. This is affirmed by Steely and Bensel, who state that sexual abuse affects social life and interferes with the social development of children as they struggle to make friends and are at risk of struggling with romantic relationships in the future.²⁰ Children who are victims of sexual abuse are most likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD].²¹ PTSD is caused by bad memories and flashbacks of the abuse.²² They are often depressed and find it hard to manage the different feelings that they experience. They are likely to self-isolate as they may lose interest in things like playing.²³ Social skills and poor interpersonal relationships are the main indicators of sexual abuse.

¹¹ Saferspaces, "Child Maltreatment in South Africa," SaferSpaces, 2021, <https://www.saferspaces.org.za/understand/entry/child-maltreatment-in-south-africa>.

¹² Victor Selengia, Hanh Nguyen Thi Thuy, and Declare Mushi, "Prevalence and Patterns of Child Sexual Abuse in Selected Countries of Asia and Africa: A Review of Literature," *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 9 (2020): 146–60.

¹³ UNICEF, "Violence against Children" (2017), <https://www.unicef.org/protection/violence-against-children>.

¹⁴ Shoba, "Abused, Beaten, Neglected: South African Children Exposed to Horrific Levels of Violence."

¹⁵ Selengia, Thuy, and Mushi, "Prevalence and Patterns of Child Sexual Abuse in Selected Countries of Asia and Africa..."

¹⁶ Frank Selelo Rapholo, "Factors Influencing Non-Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse amongst Bapedi Tribe in Polokwane, Limpopo Province, South Africa," *Global Journal of Health Science* 11, no. 12 (2019): 175.

¹⁷ Lisa Aronson Fontes and Carol Plummer, "Cultural Issues in Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 19, no. 5 (2010): 491–518.

¹⁸ Rapholo, "Factors Influencing Non-Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse amongst Bapedi Tribe in Polokwane..."

¹⁹ Mugabe, 'Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe'.

²⁰ Mollee Steely and Tusty Ten Bensel, "Child Sexual Abuse within Educational Settings: A Qualitative Study on Female Teachers Who Sexually Abuse Their Students," *Deviant Behavior* 41, no. 11 (2020): 1440–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2019.1624288>.

²¹ Andrea Kohn Maikovich, Karestan C. Koenen, and Sara R. Jaffee, "Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms and Trajectories in Child Sexual Abuse Victims: An Analysis of Sex Differences Using the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being," *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 37, no. 5 (July 17, 2009): 727–37, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-009-9300-x>.

²² Miriam Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe" (University of the Free State, 2021).

²³ Rapholo, "Factors Influencing Non-Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse amongst Bapedi Tribe in Polokwane..."

Child sexual abuse can lead to a decline in a child's academic performance, as the trauma they experience can overwhelm their ability to concentrate.²⁴ During such instances of abuse, children may become disoriented and lose enthusiasm for activities such as attending school that once brought them joy. Sexual abuse has an impact on the child's physical and mental health functioning, as well as their social and educational outcomes.²⁵ The academic performance of children who have been abused drops as they are mentally strained and under oppression due to stress. Children who are sexually abused tend to withdraw from school activities as they fear that participating in school activities will expose them to their abusers.²⁶ In other words, sexually abused children begin to avoid people and places that are familiar to them as they think that people can see through them. The inability to manage feelings of anger, sadness, betrayal, and victimisation sometimes leads to children dropping out of school.²⁷

Positioning CSA in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) consists of different African countries from low, lower, middle, upper-middle, and high-income countries. The World Bank reported that SSA faces several developmental challenges such as increased cases of sexual abuse and the rise in orphanage establishments.²⁸ Moreover, Reza and colleagues found that children in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are more vulnerable to CSA.²⁹ It has been reported that one-third of children in Malawi, Eswatini, and Tanzania are highly susceptible to experiencing sexual abuse before they even turn 18 years old. Children's vulnerability to child sexual abuse (CSA) in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is significantly increased by the fact that approximately 56 million children in the region are orphaned.³⁰ Due to children being orphaned, they are predisposed to economic, social, and psychological hardships.³¹ It is during that time that the perpetrator sees the opportunity to exploit those children. To prove that orphaned children are susceptible to CSA, a review study was conducted by Nichols and colleagues. This study found that children who are orphaned are more likely to be sexually abused,³² and experience forced sexual debut.³³ A meta-analysis report showcased that orphanhood has a significant risk that predisposes children to risk of child sexual abuse.³⁴ It was against this backdrop that this study seeks to review the psychosocial effects of CSA specifically on a girl child. As it synthesises the findings from various authors, it is important to remember the dire statistics in SSA concerning CSA.

METHODOLOGY

This scoping review followed five steps as proposed by Arksey and O'Malley³⁵ and the review used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) for reporting and transparency.³⁶ The scoping review format was used to determine the forms of evidence which are currently available and to identify and analyse any knowledge gaps.³⁷ The researchers made use of international databases (EBSCOHost, PubMed, ScienceDirect), and local

²⁴ Mphatheni, Maluleke, and Snyman, "Understanding the Dynamics Involved in Sexual Offences against..."

²⁵ Judy Cashmore and Rita Shackel, "The Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse," 2013.

²⁶ Steely and Bensel, "Child Sexual Abuse within Educational Settings: A Qualitative ."

²⁷ Cashmore and Shackel, "The Long-Term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse."

²⁸ World Bank, "Africa Overview: Development News, Research, Data ," 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/overview>.

²⁹ Avid Reza et al., "Sexual Violence and Its Health Consequences for Female Children in Swaziland: A Cluster Survey Study," *The Lancet* 373, no. 9679 (2009): 1966–72.

³⁰ UNICEF, "Towards an AIDS-Free Generation - Children and AIDS Stocktaking Report, 2013," UNICEF DATA, 2013., 2013, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/towards-an-aids-free-generation-children-and-aids-stocktaking-report-2013/>.

³¹ Jody Heymann, Lorraine Sherr, and Rachel Kidman, *Protecting Childhood in the AIDS Pandemic: Finding Solutions That Work* (OUP USA, 2012).

³² J Nichols et al., "Physical and Sexual Abuse in Orphaned Compared to Non-Orphaned Children in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 38, no. 2 (2014): 304–16.

³³ S J S Pascoe et al., "Increased Risk of HIV-Infection among School-Attending Orphans in Rural Zimbabwe," *AIDS Care* 22, no. 2 (2010): 206–20.

³⁴ Rachel Kidman and Tia Palermo, "The Relationship between Parental Presence and Child Sexual Violence: Evidence from Thirteen Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 51 (2016): 172–80.

³⁵ Arksey and O'Malley, 'Scoping Studies'.

³⁶ Alessandro Liberati et al., "The PRISMA Statement for Reporting Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses of Studies That Evaluate Health Care Interventions: Explanation and Elaboration," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 151, no. 4 (2009): W-65.

³⁷ Hilary Arksey and Lisa O'Malley, "Scoping Studies: Towards a Methodological Framework," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8, no. 1 (February 2005): 19–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>.

databases (African Journals Online and Sabinet African Journals) to identify studies. Moreover, due to the scarcity of studies with disaggregated findings on age and gender, the researchers performed forward and hand searches using Google Scholar and Google. In terms of the search strategy, they relied on Boolean keywords, truncations, and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) concepts to perform the search. They searched the databases using the following keywords ("psychosocial effects" AND "sexual assault" OR rape OR "sexual violence" OR "sexual abuse" OR "Child sexual abuse" AND "girl child" OR child* AND Africa OR Sub-Saharan Africa).

The researchers placed the selected articles on EndNote 21 for managing exported articles. Three reviewers, TK, FK, and CM, were responsible for screening the eligibility of articles for analysis. To make the correct screening, the reviewers looked at the inclusion criteria which were; articles that were published between 2012 to 2023, articles that covered the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on the girl child to provide a more comprehensive view of the study, and primary studies that used either qualitative, mixed methods or quantitative approaches. The articles that met the inclusion criteria were entered in the data charting table (see Figure 2). The data charting table assisted the researchers in identifying the emerging themes from the selected articles. Having the data charted promoted the researchers' attempt at transparency. The data was analysed thematically using thematic analysis.

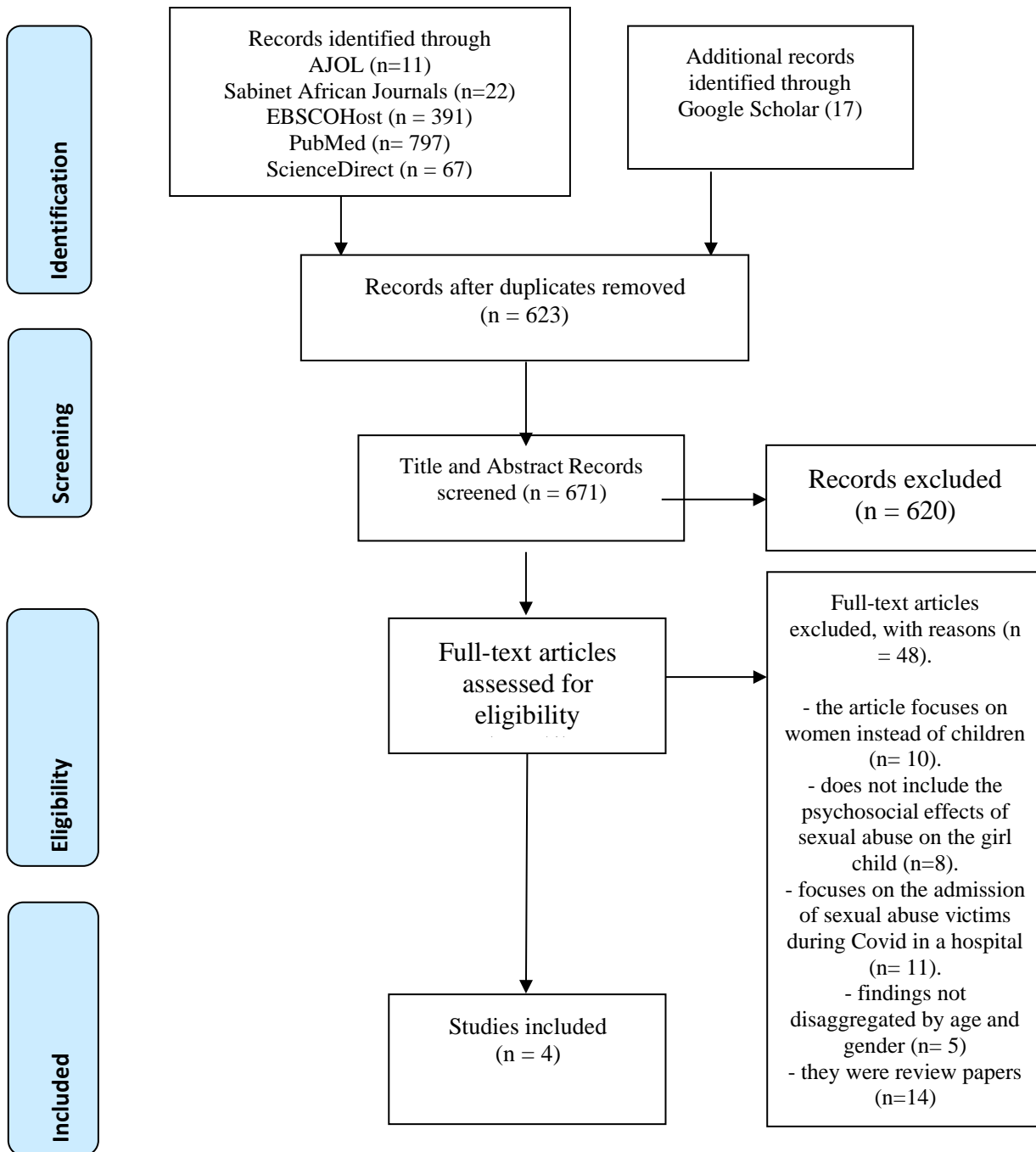


Figure 1: PRISMA-ScR Diagram
 Source for the Chart: Liberati et al.³⁸

³⁸ Liberati et al., "The PRISMA Statement for Reporting Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses of Studies That Evaluate Health Care Interventions: Explanation and Elaboration."

Table 1: Data Charting Table

Authors and year	Title	Location	Research approach or design	Participants	Main findings
Mugabe (2021) ³⁹	Psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse on the holistic development of the girl child in Zimbabwe	Zimbabwe	A qualitative, descriptive study	10 girls (14-15 years old)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sexual abuse affects the moral, physical, cognitive/intellectual, emotional, social, and behavioural development of Form 2 girl learners. Sexual abuse impacts the academic performance of the participant, their health, and survival Culture is one of the risk factors that expose children to sexual abuse
Gqgabi & Smit (2019) ⁴⁰	Psycho-social effects of father-daughter incest: views of South African social workers	North-West province of South Africa	Qualitative	Social worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mothers often neglect their daughters. Dysfunctional family systems contribute to incest. CSA by a trusted family member causes major psychological trauma, and victims often feel guilty and blame themselves for the incest occurrence.
Ogunfowokan & Fajemilehin (2015) ⁴¹	Experiences of Sexual Abuse by Adolescent Girls in Ife/Ijesa Zone, Nigeria	Nigeria	A mixed method approach, Cross-sectional design	224 girls (14-17 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girls often prefer to internalise their experience of sexual abuse; Children who are sexually abused experience challenges in socialising with their peers; Girls who were sexually abused as children experienced high levels of sexual abuse in the adolescent stage as they debuted quickly to sexual activities; Perpetrators of child abuse on the girl child were rich men and politicians, teachers and peers; Threat and force are mainly used when perpetrators molest a girl child.

³⁹ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe."

⁴⁰ Rosemary Boitumelo Gqgabi and Elizabeth Ivy Smit, "Psycho-Social Effects of Father–Daughter Incest: Views of South African Social Workers," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 28, no. 7 (2019): 840–59.

⁴¹ A A Ogunfowokan and B R Fajemilehin, "Experiences of Sexual Abuse by Adolescent Girls in Ife/Ijesa Zone, Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Health Sciences* 15, no. 2 (2015): 89.

Ward et al. (2018) ⁴²	Sexual violence against children in South Africa: A nationally representative cross-sectional study of prevalence and correlates	South-Africa	Quantitative, cross-sectional study	Children aged 15–17	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School environment, parent substance abuse, and disability were noted as some of the risk factors for CSA.• Poor parent-child relationship is one of the risk factors for CSA.
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⁴² Ward et al., “Sexual Violence against Children in South Africa: A Nationally Representative Cross-Sectional Study of Prevalence and Correlates.”

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

In developing the themes, the researchers were guided by Clarke and Braun's six phases of data analysis. Firstly, the researchers familiarised themselves with the collected data.⁴³ The researchers placed the collected data on the data charting table and started to read and re-read the main findings on the table. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data so they could be able to check if the collected data was relevant to the identified research question. Secondly, the researchers organised data meaningfully and systematically by developing codes using the comment function on Microsoft Word so they would notice them in the right-hand side margin. Thirdly, in generating themes, the researchers looked at the comments on the Microsoft Word side margin to check which codes shared meaning and could be combined to form two themes that were related to the study aim. Fourthly, researchers checked the identified themes and found that they made sense and aligned with the study's aim. The main findings of the sampled articles were linked to the codes identified. The identified themes are presented here in the form of an article.

Table 2: Emerging Themes and Sub-themes

Emerg ed themes	Subthemes
Psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse	1.1 Violation of Rights and Psychosocial Functioning 1.2 Behavioural change 1.3 Early sexual debut and cognitive effect
Coverage of literature on the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on a girl child	

Theme One: Psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse

Regarding the psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse experienced by the girl child, some of the reviewed papers emerged bearing different subthemes, namely, violation of rights and psychosocial functioning, behavioural change; and early sexual debut and cognitive effects.

(a) Subtheme 1: Violation of Rights and Psychosocial Functioning

Child sexual abuse violates a child's rights and dehumanises them; just like any other abuse it cripples many children and limits their chances of reaching their full potential. Additionally, CSA does not only affect children physically, but it also impacts their psychosocial functioning.⁴⁴ For instance, one of the participants in the study conducted by Mugabe reported that:

*"Some of the causes of CSA were as a result of myths that surrounded HIV and AIDS cure that if one sleeps with a virgin they will be completely cured. Children were also vulnerable in broken, polygamous, poorly parented homes and when they lived in the custody of relatives, neighbours and friends."*⁴⁵

On the other hand, Ogunfowokan and Fajemilehin reported that young girls are violated by their teachers and shared that:

*"There are some teachers when they see a girl like this, they will like her and then instruct her to help them buy food or something else. They just want the girl to be roaming about their offices. They can also ask her to come and mark scripts or record scores. Through that, they will be touching her body and will be playing with her body. She too will not be able to talk."*⁴⁶

Whilst other children are violated of their rights, some of the participants reported that some children experience CSA at the expense of religion. The following was reported by Mugabe:

⁴³ Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, "Teaching Thematic Analysis: Overcoming Challenges and Developing Strategies for Effective Learning," *The Psychologist* 26, no. 2 (2013): 120–23.

⁴⁴ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe"; Ogunfowokan and Fajemilehin, "Experiences of Sexual Abuse by Adolescent Girls in Ife/Ijesa Zone, Nigeria."

⁴⁵ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe," 112.

⁴⁶ Ogunfowokan and Fajemilehin, "Experiences of Sexual Abuse by Adolescent Girls in Ife/Ijesa Zone, Nigeria."

“In some churches like the Apostolic sector, they say that they have dreamt of marrying another wife, pointing to an underage girl. The parents do not refute this as they believe that it’s an act of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁷

Moreover, some of the victims of CSA are also prone to mental health problems. This was captured by one of the participants in the study conducted by Mugabe who indicated that:

“CSA leads to mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, substance misuse, eating disorders, self-injurious behaviour, anger and aggression, sexual symptoms and inappropriate sexual behaviour.”⁴⁸

(b) Subtheme 2: Behavioural change

Mental challenges and behavioural changes were accentuated as some of the psychological effects of child sexual abuse on the girl child. The reviewed study by Mugabe showcased that when a girl child experiences sexual abuse, they are more likely to change their behaviour and also isolate themselves from their peers.⁴⁹ Their behavioural change is also worsened by the fact that some of the girls who end up contracting HIV and AIDS are stigmatised in society. To capture the issue of behavioural change, Mugabe reported that:

“I think those people who would have been sexually abused also become abusers themselves... an example is my late brother who was abused by our cousin who had also been abused by his father.”⁵⁰

In trying to provide the reason for their behavioural change, Gqgabi and Smit found that:

“They retaliate, their behaviour is mostly maladaptive but when you look at the core it's because of what happened to them.”⁵¹

(c) Subtheme 3: Early sexual debut and cognitive effects

Moreover, the reviewed literature indicates that the girl child who is sexually abused is more likely to experience an early debut concerning sexual activities.⁵² The reason for the early debut is that:

“Those girls who like to befriend ‘aristos’ (sugar daddies) when they are still students or those that are usually making friends with boys. You see, when these girls are going home from school, they walk with boys so they get raped.”

As a result of early debut to sexual activities and/or being raped, some of the girl children end up being demotivated in their school work as they see no purpose. In the view of Mugabe, some of the girl children show significantly lower intelligence. In terms of cognitive functioning, Mugabe reports that:

“Learners who have been sexually abused are not emotionally stable, whether in the four walls, outside the classroom or in the playgrounds... learners who have been victims of sexual abuse tend to misinterpret other people's intentions as hostility. Therefore, their defence heightens and can result in aggressive behaviour. ...learners who are victims of CSA display behaviour concern which on its own severely affects their emotional development.”⁵³

Theme Two: Coverage of literature on the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on a girl child.

The majority of studies conducted on the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on a girl child are conducted without disaggregating findings on gender and age. From the sampled articles, it became evident that studies that disaggregate the findings opt to use qualitative research approaches and mixed methods. However, in those studies that disaggregate the findings, the researchers discovered that several factors

⁴⁷ Mugabe, “Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe,” 114.

⁴⁸ Mugabe, “Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe,” 119.

⁴⁹ Mugabe, “Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe.”

⁵⁰ Mugabe, “Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe,” 115.

⁵¹ Gqgabi and Smit, “Psycho-Social Effects of Father–Daughter Incest: Views of South African Social Workers,” 851.

⁵² Ogunfowokan and Fajemilehin, “Experiences of Sexual Abuse by Adolescent Girls in Ife/Ijesa Zone, Nigeria.”

⁵³ Mugabe, “Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe,” 136.

predispose a girl child to abuse. For example, a girl child is often threatened by perpetrators. The participant reported that:

“Young men are usually the perpetrators most especially the boyfriends (sexual partners). If a girl promised him sex and she did not fulfil it at the right time or verbally abused him when she is being proposed to, he could rape her either by himself alone or with his friends if he cannot handle her alone. Such cases are very rampant.”⁵⁴

As a result, those being molested are mentally affected and do not disclose the abuse they experienced. Evidently, children will wait and only disclose the abuse that they have experienced when they are older whilst others decide to bottle their experience as their fathers made them believe that their acts were justified. The key informant in the study indicated that:

“A daughter disclosed that ‘I know that my father loves me as a daughter. I didn’t know there was anything wrong with that up until my mom confronted the whole thing’.”⁵⁵

Whilst the above girl child was fortunate to have a mother who confronted her, unfortunately not all girl children trust their mothers especially when the perpetrator is a stepfather of the child. One of the participants averred that she could not disclose that she was molested by her uncle and stepfather and shared that:

“...I was raped by my mother’s brother who is now late. I did not disclose the sexual abuse till he died. He was the one who was taking care of me after my mother divorced. My second encounter was with my step-father and you can just imagine how hard it has been for me. He is someone I had trusted after leaving my uncle’s house to join my mother. It seemed my own mother was in support of it. I tried telling her that Dad was making sexual advances whenever she was out of sight but she never seemed to bother. He forced himself on me. I could not even scream because he threatened to kill me or throw us away from his house if we dared talk. It is very traumatic. I am sure you can just imagine... I cannot focus on anything I do because of the abuse. The future is just bleak and I do not even know why I am still living...”⁵⁶

This goes to indicate that some of the victims of CSA do not disclose the rape case as they are afraid of experiencing secondary victimisation or not being trusted. To deepen the researchers understanding, a comparative analysis of the psychosocial impacts of child sexual abuse across different countries within Sub-Saharan Africa was conducted. This analysis sheds light on unique cultural, social, and economic factors influencing these impacts in various regions. For example, whilst both East and West African studies underscore the prevalence of stigma and mental health issues among survivors, the nuances in cultural responses and available support systems vary greatly. Such comparative insights not only enrich our understanding of the regional differences but also highlight the necessity for tailored intervention strategies that are sensitive to these distinct contexts.

DISCUSSION

Psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse has lifelong effects on children that continue to affect them throughout adulthood and has an impact on children’s academic performance.⁵⁷ This is confirmed by Gervasio and colleagues who stated that children who are sexually abused showed significantly lower intelligence and learning/memory skills compared to children who have never been exposed to sexual abuse.⁵⁸ However, the CSA survivors’ memories are affected by PTSD because their minds are constantly engaged in bad thoughts and memories

⁵⁴ Ogunfowokan and Fajemilehin, “Experiences of Sexual Abuse by Adolescent Girls in Ife/Ijesa Zone, Nigeria.”

⁵⁵ Gqgabi and Smit, “Psycho-Social Effects of Father–Daughter Incest: Views of South African Social Workers,” 848.

⁵⁶ Mugabe, “Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe.”

⁵⁷ Mugabe, “Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe.”

⁵⁸ Maddi Gervasio et al., “The Association between Neurocognition and Sexual Abuse within a Children’s Psychiatric Inpatient Program,” *The Clinical Neuropsychologist* 36, no. 1 (2022): 189–206.

of the trauma that they experienced.⁵⁹ This is affirmed by De Miranda et.al. who state that sexually abused children have poor performance in selective remedy tests due to fear, difficulties in sleeping, and anxiety as they find it difficult to complete tasks that require focused attention or good memory skills.⁶⁰ Children's brains do not function well when they are in pressurised situations.⁶¹ This reaffirms earlier findings by Singh and colleagues who state that the development of the sexually abused child's brain fails to develop as it should. A child exposed to sexual abuse at a young age is most likely to experience developmental delays such as delayed speech development due to the poor functionality of their brain.⁶² About 48% of the children who were admitted to an inpatient hospital in Turkey for psychotic assessment, were due to exposure to sexual abuse.⁶³

Children who grew up being abused have higher chances of being abusers in the future.⁶⁴ Children who have been sexually abused often isolate themselves from friends or family for fear of being judged, or rejected, and sometimes because they feel different.⁶⁵ They also avoid familiar places and things that they previously enjoyed doing as they fear that people might perceive that they are abused. One of the reasons why CSA victims isolate themselves from people is because they feel vulnerable and fear they may be unable to protect themselves should they be attacked by anyone as they have developed a victim mentality.⁶⁶ Due to loss of confidence and low self-esteem, they are concerned that they are not good enough and fear being rejected by people.

However, not every CSA victim will exhibit these behaviours. Some of the sexually abused children tend to be sexually active at a young age and enjoy engaging in sexual activities such as masturbation and other sexual activities inappropriate for their age, molesting other children, and talking about sex too much.⁶⁷ This puts children at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases in their youth due to engaging in underage sexual activities with multiple partners.⁶⁸ Moreover, children who are sexually abused are most likely to remain in abusive relationships in the future as they are used to being controlled and abused.⁶⁹ It is easy for them to mistake abuse for love as that is how they are used to being treated. Due to the anger that they harbour from a young age when they grow up, they express that anger through violent behaviour and by causing pain to others.

Coverage of literature on the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on a girl child

Children who experience sexual abuse are often unable to disclose their experience at a young age. Some of the children are unable to disclose their experience of sexual abuse as they fear that community members will stigmatise them.⁷⁰ Theimer and Hansen suggest that the person who is stigmatised ends up experiencing feelings of not belonging, low self-esteem and self-concept, uncertainty, and decreased self-worth, among other negative psycho-social consequences typically resulting from being labelled.⁷¹ As a

⁵⁹ Mauricio Barrera, Liliana Calderón, and Vaughan Bell, "The Cognitive Impact of Sexual Abuse and PTSD in Children: A Neuropsychological Study," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 22, no. 6 (August 2013): 625–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2013.811141>.

⁶⁰ Debora Marques De Miranda et al., "How Is COVID-19 Pandemic Impacting Mental Health of Children and Adolescents?," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 51 (2020): 101845.

⁶¹ Claudia E van der Put et al., "Child Maltreatment among Boy and Girl Probationers: Does Type of Maltreatment Make a Difference in Offending Behavior and Psychosocial Problems?," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 46 (2015): 142–51.

⁶² Mannat Mohanjeet Singh, Shradha S Parsekar, and Sreekumaran N Nair, "An Epidemiological Overview of Child Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 3, no. 4 (2014): 430–35.

⁶³ Duygu Karagöz, "Investigation of Clinical Characteristics of Children and Adolescents Followed under Health Precaution," *Psikiyatride Güncel Yaklaşımlar* 14, no. Suppl. 1 (2022): 268–77.

⁶⁴ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe"; Singh, Parsekar, and Nair, "An Epidemiological Overview of Child Sexual Abuse."

⁶⁵ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe"; Franziska Meinck et al., "Disclosure of Physical, Emotional and Sexual Child Abuse, Help-Seeking and Access to Abuse Response Services in Two South African Provinces," *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 22, no. sup1 (2017): 94–106.

⁶⁶ Angela Diaz et al., "Effect of Child Abuse and Neglect on Risk Behaviors in Inner-City Minority Female Adolescents and Young Adults," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 101 (2020): 104347.

⁶⁷ David Lisak and Paul M Miller, "Repeat Rape and Multiple Offending among Undetected Rapists," *Violence and Victims* 17, no. 1 (2002): 73–84.

⁶⁸ Arman Z Chacko et al., "A Study on Child Sexual Abuse Reported by Urban Indian College Students," *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 11, no. 9 (2022): 5072–76.

⁶⁹ Karagöz, "Investigation of Clinical Characteristics of Children and Adolescents Followed under Health Precaution."

⁷⁰ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe."

⁷¹ Kate Theimer and David J Hansen, "Child Sexual Abuse: Stigmatization of Victims and Suggestions for Clinicians," 2018.

result, the girl child who is stigmatised does not disclose when she is molested by an elder. Many girls who have experienced sexual abuse are called bad names that make them feel as if they do not fit in at school or in the community.⁷² The derogatory behaviour affects schoolgirls psychologically, resulting in poor performance at school.⁷³ This leads to children dropping out of school as they constantly feel uncomfortable and as if they do not fit in at school.

Africans believe that they should not air private or domestic matters publicly.⁷⁴ As a result, they prefer to settle CSA perpetrated by a family member outside of court. In Zimbabwe, rape cases are often settled out of court. The perpetrator either pays compensation to the girl's father or pays the bride price and marries the girl to avoid bringing public attention and shame to the girl and her family.⁷⁵ Due to the financial and economic challenges that the families in African communities face, they are often silenced for financial gain. Mothers will rather watch their children suffer silently, especially when the abuser is the breadwinner because they fear losing financial support.⁷⁶

In African communities, children are taught to obey instructions from elders and those in authority.⁷⁷ As a result, those with power and elders such as fathers and uncles together with teachers abuse their power and use it to oppress and abuse the girl child. They also use the respect that children have towards them to silence them. They instruct them not to say anything, knowing that they will obey them out of respect, if not fear. Abusers silence their victims by threatening them and their loved ones.⁷⁸ As soon as girls reach their early teens in sub-Saharan Africa, they are typically married off to men who are twice or even thrice their age.⁷⁹ Therefore, the act of CSA is institutionalised by recognising and accepting the marriage of children at a young age which constitutes statutory rape in South Africa.⁸⁰

In Africa, most children are raised by their relatives and grandparents alongside uncles whilst their parents are employed in the city working to provide for their children. This makes children vulnerable to abuse as perpetrators have easy access to children. Children need affection and a nurturing relationship, as their parents are not available to provide that love and protection. Perpetrators often target and groom such children.⁸¹ They groom the children by buying them gifts, forming a close relationship with them so that they can trust them, and teaching them to keep secrets. This closeness then makes it difficult to believe that the perpetrator has indeed abused the child as they appear to care for the child in the eyes of the others. Being an orphan places a child at significant risk of being sexually abused.⁸² This is because the child is often exposed to different relatives as no single person is responsible for the child's care, and this exposes them to perpetrators who feel confident that they can get away with the abuse.

Children are often manipulated by their abusers into thinking that it is their fault that they are abused. Feelings of shame and guilt that arise out of abuse reduce the chances of the child telling anyone about the abuse because they fear being judged and think that people will blame them for the abuse.⁸³ However, many children encounter disbelief or dismissal of their claims because adults do not wish to acknowledge that abuse is occurring. The disbelief and dismissal of the children's abuse claims result in the child feeling shame and preferring to remain silent as they worry that no one will believe them because

⁷² Miriam Mugabe, Shamiso Chingombe, and Kudzai Chinyoka, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Academic Performance of Grade Seven Learners in Gweru Urban, Zimbabwe," *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 7, no. 4 (2016): 255–63.

⁷³ Singh, Parsekar, and Nair, "An Epidemiological Overview of Child Sexual Abuse."

⁷⁴ Mugabe, Chingombe, and Chinyoka, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Academic Performance of Grade Seven Learners in Gweru Urban, Zimbabwe."

⁷⁵ Mugabe, "Psychosocial Effects of Child Sexual Abuse on the Holistic Development of the Girl Child in Zimbabwe."

⁷⁶ Anthony Shuko Musiwa, "Addressing Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse: Lessons from the Victim-Friendly Court in Marondera District, Zimbabwe," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 37, no. 2 (2020): 207–25.

⁷⁷ Rapholo, "Factors Influencing Non-Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse amongst Bapedi Tribe in Polokwane..."

⁷⁸ Meinck et al., "Disclosure of Physical, Emotional and Sexual Child Abuse, Help-Seeking and Access to Abuse Response Services in Two South African Provinces."

⁷⁹ Musiwa, "Addressing Intrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse: Lessons from the Victim-Friendly Court in Marondera District, Zimbabwe."

⁸⁰ Republic of South Africa, "Children's Act 38 of 2005," 2005, <https://www.gov.za/documents/childrens-act>.

⁸¹ Gqgabi and Smit, "Psycho-Social Effects of Father–Daughter Incest: Views of South African Social Workers."

⁸² Meinck et al., "Disclosure of Physical, Emotional and Sexual Child Abuse, Help-Seeking and Access to Abuse Response Services in Two South African Provinces."

⁸³ Noel Garikai Muridzo and Victor Chikadzi, "Some Impediments to Child Sexual Abuse Interventions and Corresponding Social Work Implications: Reflections on the Zimbabwean Victim Friendly System," *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 5, no. 4 (2020): 257–66.

not even their families trust them. It is incidents such as these that children believe the lies told to them by their abusers because nobody else seems to believe them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings the following recommendations are made:

- Social service practitioners should conduct awareness campaigns in schools to encourage learners or children to not internalise their challenges and educate them about the impact of internalising their challenges;
- Researchers should conduct studies on the psychosocial effects of child sexual abuse by disaggregating the data based on gender and age. The researchers could use either qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches to provide primary data that can later be synthesised.
- As most of the available literature on the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on the girl child is old, more recent research should be conducted using qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative research should include conducting interviews where new information is gathered from both victims of sexual abuse and professionals working with victims of sexual abuse. The national lockdown that occurred during COVID-19 fuelled a significant increase in the abuse rate, and therefore recent quantitative studies should be conducted to gather recent statistics.

CONCLUSION

Sexual abuse of the girl child continues to rise globally, indicating the need for more research to be conducted so that additional and new information about CSA is collected. Children who have been sexually abused experience trauma and exhibit problematic behaviours, whether they be mild or severe. Yet, there is a dearth of quantitative research on sexual abuse conducted on the African continent due to a lack of resources such as equipment and human resources that these circumstances warrant. The environment in which a child grows has proven to be one of the risk factors for sexual abuse of the girl child. This can be a school environment, community, or family environment where the mother and child do not have a good relationship, or the parents are not available to protect a child, and abusers take advantage of the situation. Community members' lack of knowledge contributes to issues like stigmatisation, which continues to victimise the victims and empower the perpetrators.

LIMITATIONS

This scoping review, whilst comprehensive in its approach, is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the review relied on literature accessible through specific databases such as African Journals Online, Sabinet African Journals, EBSCOHost, PubMed, and ScienceDirect. This selection may have excluded relevant studies published in other journals or databases not covered in this review. Secondly, the study focused exclusively on the psychosocial effects of sexual abuse on the girl child in Sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, the findings may not be generalisable to other regions or to the experiences of boys or non-binary children who have undergone similar abuse. Moreover, the language filter was English, and we may have omitted or missed articles that were written in other languages other than English.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Ms. Tsholofelo Keikabile is a registered social worker and completed her Masters in Child Protection with North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus. She is currently working as a Social Worker at COSUP which is a Community Oriented Substance Use Program, in Gauteng, South Africa.

Dr. Frans Matlakala is a senior lecturer at North-West University, Department of Social Work, Mafikeng Campus. He is also a registered social worker and served as the supervisor for the first author.

Dr. Curwyn Mapaling, a clinical psychologist and award-winning Mandela Rhodes Scholar, is a senior lecturer at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and director of PsycheMap Psychology Practice and Research Consultancy. With a PhD in Education, he is interested in well-being research, bridging the realms of clinical psychology and education to address systemic challenges and foster resilience and success. His work, recognised by accolades like the Nelson Mandela University Alumni Rising Star Award, underscores a commitment to mental health innovation and educational excellence.