

HIDDEN HARMS: THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG YOUNG GIRLS (13-17 YEARS) IN SMALL-SCALE MINING COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities. The research utilises the Intersectionality Theory proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), which provides the theoretical basis of the study. The following objectives guide the study: to investigate the forms of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities; to explore the contributing factors of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities; and to develop community-based strategies that can be utilised to address sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities. A purposive sample of nine (9) young girls was selected. Semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Interviews were used to generate data in this research. Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis approach was also used to analyse data. It emerged from the study that the support for sexual abuse survivors includes crisis centres, counselling, medical care, legal aid, and community outreach programmes. The study concludes that young girls in small-scale mining communities face various problems in as far as sexual abuse is concerned. These problems affect them psychologically, socially and physically. Whilst child protection

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systems have been put in place to address these problems, the research uncovers loopholes which have proved young girls in small-scale mining communities to be a highly vulnerable population in these settings. It is, therefore, recommended that mining laws be incorporated in child protection frameworks and introduce strict licencing to monitor small-scale mining in order to protect young girls from sexual abuse. Multi sectoral collaboration is also encouraged to effectively address the problem of sexual abuse to counter resource problems which may hinder child protection in these communities. Non-state actors should establish strong partnerships and referral mechanisms with other community-based organisations to facilitate seamless access to a wider range of resources.

Key Words: *child protection, protection mechanisms, victims*

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

In Zimbabwe, small-scale mining environments have proven to be extremely dangerous for young children due to a lack of social protection and safety as well as increased economic stress. One cannot deny that many forms of violence, abuses, and insecurity stem from the living conditions in small-scale mining communities. UNICEF (2022), reports that in regions where small-scale mining is prevalent, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, one in five girls involved in mining activities have reported being sexually abused or harassed by miners, local traders, or others involved in the mining industry .While different pieces of legislation have been put in place to protect the lives of young girls, young girls living in small-scale mining communities receive little to no care.

Sexual abuse has been a problem of global concern, particularly in Asia and South American communities like the Philippines and parts of India. Small-scale mining communities in these global regions are mostly isolated and experience poor law enforcement which exposes young girls to sexual exploitation. Delves' 2023 State of the ASM sector

report finds that globally, over 44.67 million people are thought to work in ASM (Artisanal and Small-scale Mining), with women comprising around 30% of ASM workers (World Bank, 2023). This proportion varies from country to country, with women estimated to make up as much as 70% of the ASM workforce in Guinea and as little as 4% in the Philippines (*ibid.*). Researches from Asia highlight that most developing countries like the Philippines and Indonesia are major hotspots of sexual exploitation where, in most cases, young girls are at risk as they often engage in sexual relationships in exchange for money, food and or protection. A study in the Philippines found that approximately 25% of adolescent girls working in small-scale mining communities reported experiencing some form of sexual violence or harassment (Tan and Chen, 2021). Similarly in Colombia, a report on the informal mining sector showed that 30-40% of young girls in mining communities had been victims of sexual violence, often by male miners or other community members (Ramirez and Perez, 2023). Young girls in these communities lack education, economic opportunities, access to resources which further exposes them in scenarios of sexual exploitation.

Small-scale mining communities have been prominent hosts for sexual violence in Africa and particularly in Zimbabwe. An estimated 40 million people are employed in the informal mining sector globally and these include women and young girls (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2021). Zimbabwe has responded to the many forms of sexual assault and abuse in particular in a proactive as well as reactive manner because of the existence of local, regional, and various international legislation. Considering Zimbabwe's perspective on gender-based violence (GBV), despite the ostensibly favourable conditions, one in three women still report experiencing GBV. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to the most severe kinds of sexual abuse, which has been identified as the leading category of GBV in small-scale mining communities. Little is known about the experiences

of young girls in small-scale mining communities and their viewpoints on sexual assault, despite the fact that national research has identified risk factors for this type of abuse in population surveys.

Among mining nations in sub-Saharan Africa, high risk zones and major hotspots of sexual abuse and exploitation have been in small-scale mining communities. Studies reveal sexual exploitation among young girls in mining countries like Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania have been caused mainly by gender issues. Research by scholars like Osei (2020) and Fathima (2023) highlight how patriarchal power dynamics, combined with economic stress, place young girls in great danger from male miners and employers and members of the community, resulting in sexual abuse and exploitation. The involvement of young girls in various forms of labour, exposes them to multiple forms of exploitation due to the informal and dangerous nature of the mining industry. The problem is further exacerbated by the transient nature of mining communities, where anonymity and poor law enforcement enable perpetrators to act without fear of the consequences of sexual violence.

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, small-scale mining plays a crucial role in local economies of many countries, including Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Malawi. Small-scale mining is commonly informal in these communities, characterised by weak child protection services and poor enforcement of labour laws and child protection services which create a platform where young girls are at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. In Zimbabwe, particularly in peri-urban districts, the influx of people into mining areas as a result of economic pressure has made vulnerable populations, including young girls, to great danger from various forms of sexual abuse and GBV. According to Moyo and Dube (2021), such communities are marked by poverty, isolation, and limited access to

education, factors which exacerbate the vulnerability of young girls to sexual exploitation.

In Zimbabwe, small-scale mining is an important economic activity, particularly in peri-urban and rural communities where large-scale mining is less prevalent. This sector, however, is largely informal and largely characterised by poor working conditions and limited oversight, which exacerbates the vulnerability of young girls to sexual exploitation and abuse. As in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, young girls in Zimbabwe are often drawn into the small-scale mining sector due to poverty and lack of educational opportunities. Chikozho and Nyathi (2021) argue that the economic necessity for families, compounded by social and cultural factors, makes young girls more vulnerable to exploitation within these communities, especially in isolated mining areas

Sexual abuse among young girls in Zimbabwe's small-scale mining communities has been an increasing concern due to the informal nature of these settings. This implies that young girls living in these communities are without access to adequate protection or support systems. According to Approximately 28% of girls in mining areas have experienced some form of sexual exploitation or abuse, with young girls reported to be particularly vulnerable due to the proximity of mining camps to remote areas where law enforcement is scarce (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2022),. This statistic highlights the extreme nature of the problem and reveals the urgent need for policy interventions to address sexual violence in these communities.

In Zimbabwe, gender inequality plays a significant role in the exploitation of young girls in the mining sector. Despite efforts made in gender equality, traditional gender norms and power imbalances remain entrenched in many rural mining areas. Mugabe (2021) and Mlambo (2023) indicate that young girls are often subjected to sexual

violence and harassment by male miners and employers in exchange for employment, resources and, in most cases, protection. These gender dynamics are further complicated by the absence of formal employment contracts, weak legal protection, and the informal nature of mining communities, leaving victims with little recourse to justice.

OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the prevalence of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities.
2. To investigate the contributing factors to sexual abuse in these small-scale mining communities.
3. To explore community-based strategies for preventing sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research borrows much from the Intersectionality Theory proposed by Crenshaw (1989), with special utility in the exploration of the prevalence of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe. The Intersectionality Theory postulates that different forms of societal oppression and discriminatory issues which include, GBV, child abuse, sexism, power imbalances and cultural practises, continue to create conditions that promote marginalisation of the vulnerable groups in society (Rowe and Nelson, 2021). It is, therefore, difficult to understand sexual violence among young girls in the brackets of GBV but rather wise to focus on gender issues in small-scale mining communities in various societal entities like social class, gender roles, sexuality and more. Women in small-scale mining communities increasingly face a risk of sexual abuse existing in its countless forms as a result of the effects of the intersection between power imbalances, gender roles in society. along with cultural effects. According to Windburn (2019), the theory suggests that social inequalities like GBV and sexual abuse are deeply generated in bigger power systems, oppressive and privileged systems

like patriarchy and economic inequality. This helps the research in understanding the deep-rooted causes of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities. Addressing sexual abuse in small-scale mining communities, therefore, needs an intersectional approach that presents and attends to the underlying.

Individual identities or a sense of societal identity is greatly influenced by communities and contextual backgrounds. These individual and social identities include sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity and gender. It is these identities that define individual contextual location. The bigger societal structures and the conditions that gear all forms of social inequalities are viewed as oppressive systems. With particular focus on young girls in small-scale mining communities, many survivors have reacted and encountered sexual violence and abuse differently. The visibility of exposure to harm, which can be seen among young girls in small-scale mining communities, creates a platform for intersectional research with variety among them, permitting an understanding of their individual encounters and the construction of a more credible research and development of response strategies.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach, using a case study design to conduct the research to investigate the prevalence of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities.

The research employed a purposive sampling strategy (Crossman, 2020) to recruit nine primary participants (young girls aged 13–17) who possessed direct, relevant knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation. This was supplemented by key informant interviews with two Social Workers from the Department of Social Development and one Community Childcare Worker, who provided crucial contextual and archival data on the survivors. Data were collected via

in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The subsequent data analysis utilized Thematic Analysis, following the rigorous methodological guidelines established by Braun and Clarke (2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FORMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

CHILD MARRIAGE

The participants' responses presented child marriage as a form of sexual abuse among young girls. The primary cause of these child marriages can be linked to cultural norms and values, poverty and economic hardship. The responses show that young girls are at risk of sexual abuse through child marriages in small-scale mining communities resulting in school dropouts and increased poverty

“Child marriages are common in many small-scale mines. In most cases, young girls are manipulated by miners whose financial status will be temporarily high at that moment and without knowledge of abuse, they are lured into early marriages resulting in school dropouts. Fake promises of good life is a form of a luring tool used by miners to lure young girls into child marriages.”

The verbatim above evidently reveals that child marriage is a form of sexual abuse that affects young girls. Research conducted by Mahfoudh (2024) on the incidents of child marriage in Yemen likewise reveals that children, especially young girls, are forced into early marriages as expressed by the participants that they are forced into early marriages by their parents. The UNFPA ESARO (2021) states that in East and Southern Africa, 31% of girls get married before turning the age of 18. The manifestation of sexual abuse in the form of child marriages can, therefore, be linked to lack of knowledge among parents as their actions evidently show that they grossly put young girls at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. The most common example is when parents force children into child marriage after they

realise that their child is sexually active. The belief that no one would want to marry someone who lost her virginity or the need to adhere to religious beliefs forces young girls into early marriages.

RAPE

The study unearthed that rape is another form of sexual abuse among young girls. The responses of the participants strongly amplified that rape is a common problem in the community. The initial causes of rape are lack of social security due to the influx of miners in the community, patriarchal structures that support male dominance in the community and isolation of these communities.

“I personally was forced to engage in sexual activity with a small-scale miner after he had offered me free transport to school several times. I couldn’t resist because school is far away from where I live. He also threatened my life if I had refused to engage in sexual activity because he had helped me a couple of days with free transport to school.”

“Most cases of rape among young girls in small-scale mining communities handled at the Department of Social Development as referrals from the police VFU [victim-friendly unit] mostly had perpetrators who were miners and members of the local community. After case management, the circumstances surrounding the rape cases handled can be linked to the lack of social security among young girls.”

The causes for this vulnerability can be linked to social isolation and lack of social security and weak governance within these communities. Recent researches pinpoint the interconnection between gender, power dynamics and poverty in as far as sexual abuse among young girls is concerned. The perpetrators in small-scale mining communities are mostly miners, individuals in positions of power who control and exploit the available resources necessary for the protection of young girls (Agbemabiese *et al.*, 2022). In the same vein, Mlambo and Sithole (2021) argue that the poor law enforcement structures, weak governance and the isolative location status of these communities make it difficult for young girls to access protection services .The

severe consequences of abuse continue to pile up and cause more problems to the lives of young girls who are already disadvantaged in many facets of human life in as much there are available resources that ensure protection. Shaw *et al.* (2023) highlight that sexual abuse in these settings causes psychosocial problems, including trauma, stress, and social stigma on young girls who already face barriers educationally and economically. Whilst acknowledging already existing legislation put in place, there is need for setting-based approaches to problem solving, strengthening of legal frameworks, and promoting community-based education.

TRANSACTIONAL SEX

The results of the study also reveal that transactional sex also appears to be another form of sexual abuse among young girls. The responses from the participants linked this form of sexual abuse to poverty, poor child protection, isolation of these settings and economic strains. Thus, the miners and community members who have access to resources use them to manipulate and perpetrate sexual abuse among young girls. Transactional sex in these settings is evident. Young girls are lured and sometimes forced into sexual relationships in exchange for food, protection, resources and money. This continues to create platforms and conditions that promote the cycle of abuse. According to Gharib and Chikadzi (2021), young girls in mining communities often engage in transactional sex as a survival strategy, where sexual relationships become a means to access resources they cannot obtain. Lack of access to education, poverty issues and isolation are among socio-economic barriers which continue to marginalise young girls and put them in danger of sexual abuse in a community where legal structures are poorly monitored and social protection is rare. Sacks *et al.* (2023) pinpoint that the normalisation of transactional sex in such environments contributes to a culture of abuse, where young girls have little choice but to accept these arrangements. From the above views, it is, therefore, clear that transactional sex as a form of sexual abuse

among young girls in small-scale mining communities reinforces gender inequalities, as girls are often treated as commodities and denied agency over their own bodies.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Participants stated that they experience sexual abuse as a form of sexual abuse in small-scale mining communities. Participants also stated that they are harassed by both the society and miners through vocally inappropriate comments and behaviour that results in sexual abuse.

“I would be honest with you that we encounter verbal attacks, behaviour and being a woman in a community fluctuated with small-scale miners (makorokoza) unnecessary comments and behavioural attacks is common and normal.”

“... it’s a pity to young adolescent girls who often encounter uncomfortable comments and sexual behaviour from the local community because of the bodily changes being referred to a ripened fruit ready for consumption.”

The above verbatims are a reflection of participants’ thoughts and insights that prove that sexual harassment is a form of sexual abuse existing in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe. Sexual harassment further exacerbates the vulnerability of young girls to sexual abuse in Zimbabwe. The biased power dynamics and social structures normalise sexual harassment, making it difficult for girls to access protection services, necessary support and justice. Young girls in small mining communities encounter unwanted sexual advances, inappropriate behaviour and comments from male miners and individuals in positions of power. Jones *et al.* (2021) reveal that in many resource extraction areas, young girls face harassment not only in public spaces, but also within their own homes, especially when families rely on the income generated from small-scale mining. In the same vein, UN Women (2020) highlights that the lack of formal employment systems and legal protection in these informal sectors

contributes to an environment where sexual harassment is tolerated as a common issue.

CAUSES OF SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG YOUNG GIRLS

LACK OF EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

The research findings indicate that lack of education and awareness is a major cause of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe. Participant testimonies indicated need for education and awareness in small-scale mining communities as it was a recurrent theme amongst them.

“...I didn’t know that I was being sexually abused until I got pregnant at the age of 15. I was told to go to the man who impregnated me who happened to be a miner and it was when he claimed not to know me that I attempted to commit suicide. I was helped by a CCW [community counselling worker] who lived in our area and he referred me to the Department of Social Development after six months of torment.”

“I did not have a say on the things I wanted. My parents made all choices for me without regard of my age. I got into a sexual relationship with my father’s friend who had amassed a fortune from small-scale mining.”

CULTURAL BELIEFS AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

The research data reflects that sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities appear as a result of cultural beliefs and traditional practices. Conservatism among members of the community has undermined the safety and protection of young girls. The study participants mentioned that there is need to address exploitative cultural beliefs and traditional practices.

“...I was told to go and live with the man I had indulged with sexually after my parents discovered I was sexually active, saying no one would want to marry someone who is not a virgin. I got help from my school teacher who had noticed my absence for months as I avoided school.”

“I never went to school, so as my parents said it, women are supposed to bear children and train to be good wives. I helped my parents in gold

panning that is when I indulged into sexual activity with other gold panners in exchange for money and favours.”

The above verbatim reflect those cultural beliefs and traditional practices are also, major causes of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities like Ward 29, Shamva. Abrahams (2022) and Sarker (2023) argue that in many societies, traditional customs and cultural norms often normalise GBV, including sexual abuse, and undermine efforts to combat it. In Zimbabwe, child marriage practices and the exposure of young girls to sexual abuse can be linked to cultural traditions, which has continuously led to sexual exploitation among young girls. Abrahams (2022) also pinpoints that these practices are sometimes justified through traditional beliefs that girls’ sexual autonomy is secondary to familial and community interests. In Ward 29 of Shamva, reports indicate that gender norms are rigid and young girls are frequently viewed as objects of exchange or property, reinforcing vulnerability to abuse. The challenge lies in shifting these deeply rooted beliefs and practices through education and awareness, as Sarker (2023) suggests, by integrating gender-sensitive approaches in both community development programmes and legal frameworks to challenge harmful traditions.

GENDER INEQUALITY

The study unravels that another major contributing factor of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities is gender inequality. The research unravels significant unfairness in the community as men are at the top of every socio-economic and political structure. The participants reported the need to break the chains of gender inequality, hence they are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

“...we don’t have a say in anything, even [being] able making decisions that affect our own lives. That is why most of us indulged into sexual activity very early because we were easily tricked and our lack of exposure give men in our community the power to manipulate us.”

“...the increased number of young girls who are referred to the Women Affairs and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education for further assistance reflect the suppression of young girls in small-scale mining communities.”

The above verbatims confirm that gender inequality continues to be a major contributing factor of sexual abuse in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe. It is, therefore, easy to link experiences of the survivors of sexual abuse in Ward 29, Shamva, to the systemic nature of gender-based discrimination, which perpetuates the vulnerability of young girls to sexual exploitation. Kabeer (2022) and Hossain and Islam (2023) argue that patriarchal structures across the globe create an environment where women and girls are systematically disempowered and marginalised. Gender norms dictate that women are responsible for domestic duties, while men dominate the public and economic spheres. Such imbalances in power have led to the exploitation of young girls, as they are seen as subordinate. According to Cornwall (2021), these unequal gender dynamics foster a climate in which sexual violence is normalised, with perpetrators exploiting the power disparity for their own gain, with minimal fear of legal consequences. Moser (2020) and Duflo (2023) have explored how economic dependence on male-dominated industries, such as mining, deepens gender disparities and exacerbates the risks of exploitation. The exclusion of women and girls from economic opportunities is very common in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe. As reflected by the above verbatims, young girls, therefore, resort to survival strategies that put them at risk of sexual abuse. Addressing these inequalities through community-based education, legal reforms, and community engagement, is crucial.

LIMITED CHILD PROTECTION AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The research identifies that limited child protection and support systems are some of the major causes of sexual abuse among young

girls in small-scale mining communities . Participants stated that they have limited access to reporting and protection systems.

“...we are located in furthest locations of the district and sometimes it is difficult to travel from our community to one central child protection department located in Wadzanai township. We need immediate relief and help centres which are easy to access.”

“We face lot of the resource challenges. I cannot fully explain them to you as it needs the leaders to tell you themselves. As CCWs we interact with the community on a daily basis and sometimes it is even more difficult for us to report cases because we have no money to travel to reporting centres which are located far away from our location.”

The verbatims above mirror the scarcity of child protection and support services in peri-urban and emerging mining towns . The participants highlighted the absence of social workers and community-based organisations are often absent and the lack of capacity to address issues of gender-based violence . Harper and Nash (2021) and Moyo (2024) highlight the insufficient healthcare facilities, counselling services, or legal assistance, for victims of sexual violence in small-scale mining settings in developing countries. This, therefore, allows perpetrators to act without fear of the law. Survivors fail to seek help and justice because of poor social and child protection services in small-scale mining. Harper and Nash (2021) argue that, without adequate support systems, young girls who experience sexual abuse are often left to cope alone, leading to long-term physical and psychological harm. It is, therefore, important to invest in child protection services and network systems like education, legal protection and health to address the root causes of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe.

COMMUNITY-BASED STRATEGIES THAT MAY BE UTILISED TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG YOUNG GIRLS IN SMALL-SCALE MINING COMMUNITIES

The research also uncovers community-based strategies that may be utilised to address sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale

mining communities. These included strengthening local legal and justice systems, access to support services community education and awareness campaigns.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL LEGAL AND JUSTICE SYSTEMS

An investigation by this study discovered that strengthening local legal and justice systems may be a significant strategy to address sexual abuse in small-scale mining communities .

“I think it would be effective if child protection system acknowledges the relevance of the chief’s courts in ensuring child protection. In an attempt to accommodate cultural and traditional systems, it would be easy for them to integrate with other statutory stakeholders.”

“People in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe validate the traditional courts more than the weak legal systems. It would be child friendly to effectively integrate this justice system in order to address the problem from a community level.”

The results from the research reflect that strengthening local legal and justice systems is crucial in addressing sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities . The effectiveness of this community-based strategy is found on the extension of protection systems to peri-urban and emerging mining towns, thereby addressing the research gap under investigation. One effective strategy is the establishment of community-based child protection committees (CPCs) and the chief’s courts in handling child protection, integrating them in small-scale mining communities. These committees ensure the effective mobilisation of community responses, enhancing referrals, raising awareness on child rights, and ensuring communities actively participate in creating a protective environment for children, especially young girls. The importance of these strategies is founded on the fact that they provide safe and accessible channels for young girls to report incidents of sexual abuse without fear of reprisals. This strategy also includes capacity-building of local stakeholders. The implementation of these strategies in small-scale mining communities can enhance

their legal and justice systems, providing better protection for young girls against sexual abuse.

ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES

The investigation discovered that enhancing community-based support service may help in addressing sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities. The study participants shared similar sentiments saying:

“...the number of child marriages in the district are a result of children not going to school which is a reflection of inadequate support services.”

“I think we need more resources to ensure that there is adequate service provision in the district in order to deal with sexual abuse effectively, especially funding and human resources. Some places in the district are extremely remote, so there is need for recruitment of CCWs to offer an extended work as ears of the Department of Social Development.”

The research data reveal that improving access to support services is crucial in addressing sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities. Whilst acknowledging the already established services put in place to address sexual abuse in Zimbabwe, this strategy, therefore, focuses on the extension of support to peri-urban and emerging mining towns like Shamva. This entails the extension of services like medical, psychological, legal, and social support, providing survivors with the necessary resources to heal and seek justice. Local legal and psychological support structures can significantly reduce the impacts of sexual abuse on young girls by offering immediate assistance and long-term monitoring (Smith and Anderson, 2023). Whilst most researches have focused on urban areas, it is, therefore, important to extend access to support services to peri-urban and emerging mining towns. Mlambo *et al.* (2022), emphasize the importance of community-based care in supporting sexual abuse survivors in Zimbabwe, arguing that access to these services improves both the physical and mental well-being of survivors, thereby fostering long-term recovery. By integrating medical, psychological, and legal

services with community education and outreach, such initiatives help create an environment that fosters healing, justice, and long-term protection for vulnerable girls.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

The participants stated that when community members are directly engaged in child protection, education and campaigns, it will ensure child protection. Participants also stated that child protection systems need to strengthen child protection committees in the district wards to ensure child protection through education and awareness. The participants also stated that people need to be educated on the importance of child protection.

“...generally, most people in small-scale mining communities underrate the teachings and information they are given concerning child protection when they are not directly engaged. Community engagement is important as when information is coming from fellow community members, the community members are more likely to accept the information, hence it will make it easy to ensure child protection.”

“People need to be educated on the importance of child protection as this may help challenge ignorance in encouraging child protection in small-scale mining communities.”

The above verbatims reveal that community education and awareness campaigns are important in addressing sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities. These initiatives aim to inform and empower both girls and community members about the risks and rights associated with sexual abuse. A noteworthy example of this is the collaboration of UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Child Care in implementing integrated outreach programmes targeting adolescent girls with education on sexual and reproductive health rights (UNICEF, 2022). These programmes not only increase knowledge, but also create safe environments for girls to access support. Strategy mechanisms like community radios, roadshows, and

school outreaches are important in raising awareness about sexual abuse. Mangwengwe (2021) proposes an integrated theoretical model combining the Social Learning Theory, the Ecological Model, and Allport's Contact Theory to guide community-based interventions in mining towns. Hence, education initiatives can change harmful social norms and reduce tolerance for sexual abuse in small-scale mining communities.

FORMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

The study concludes that sexual abuse in its many forms is widespread and an overall underreported problem in small-scale mining communities. The forms of sexual abuse among young girls investigated and identified include rape, coerced sex, sexual harassment and child marriage. In some scenarios, young girls were found to be victims of sexual abuse in exchange for food, money, or protection, reflecting the exploitative nature of their vulnerable socio-economic conditions. Whilst it is true that these forms of sexual abuse have been noted in other researches, it is clear that most of the researches focus on urban areas while the plight of young girls in small-scale mining communities is generalised. Young girls continue to be at high risk from community dangers emanating from ignorance, the nature of small-scale mining (Chikorokoza), patriarchal structures and the informal nature of small-scale mining. Whilst this research pays particular focus on sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities, it is important to take note that they also face problems beyond the focus of this research. Hence the research recommends further research on the problems faced by young girls beyond focus on sexual exploitation. Moreso, the research discovered that perpetrators of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities were not only miners, but also community members and even close family members.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

An exploration of the contributing factors of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities by the study exposed various interrelated causes. The study identified high levels of poverty as a core driver, pushing young girls into unsafe environments in search of work or survival. Poor child protection systems, lack of education and awareness and poor legal structures in the unregulated mining communities significantly exacerbate the situation. Gender based violence, along with oppressive cultural and traditional values, prevents many survivors from speaking out or seeking help. It is, therefore, clear that young girls are at increased risks from miners and members of the local community who have proved to be active perpetrators in as far as sexual abuse is concerned. Whilst it is true that it takes the community to raise a child, one can argue that it also takes the community to sexually abuse one. Community cohesion is, therefore, important primarily in ensuring that young girls in small-scale mining communities are protected. The research also detected that patriarchal structures and traditional beliefs normalise the subordination and exploitation of girls, making intervention more difficult.

COMMUNITY BASED STRATEGIES THAT CAN BE UTILISED TO ADDRESS SEXUAL ABUSE IN SMALL-SCALE MINING COMMUNITIES

This research also proposes community-based strategies that can be utilised to address sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities, particularly in Zimbabwe. These strategies include extending sexual abuse education to miners, education and awareness campaigns in the district and employing vocational training to benefit survivors. This research highlights the immediate need for a multi-sectoral, holistic approach that is motivated to prevent harm, protect, and empower young girls in small-scale mining communities. Thus, addressing sexual abuse in small-scale mining communities in Zimbabwe requires more than isolated interventions but it demands

structural changes, effective community involvement, and sustained commitment from all stakeholders mandated for child protection. It is through collaborative efforts and context-specific solutions that the rights, dignity, protection and safety of young girls in these vulnerable environments can be protected and upheld. The research findings serve as a critical call to action for policymakers, civil society, local authorities, and the mining industry to take proactive action in transforming these small-scale mining communities into safer, more equitable spaces for all children, particularly young girls who continue to suffer in silence. The answers provided in this research with regard to the objectives of this research are crucial in addressing sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities. Whilst acknowledging the local, regional and international child protection frameworks put in place to safeguard young girls in all facets of life, one can recommend an integrated approach to problem solving.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the problems identified in the research, the study proposes a variety of recommendations to ensure safety and protection among young girls in small-scale mining communities. These recommendations are, therefore, proposed in relation to the research objectives discussed earlier. These propositions are directed towards the Social Work practice, the government and the private sector.

Sexual abuse education should be extended to miners. The assumption is that the extension of education about sexual abuse to miners would foster a culture of accountability and responsibility. Such an approach would transform mindsets, where child protection is prioritised, along with economic interests.

Empowerment of young girls through education and vocational training must be developed to reduce their vulnerability. The idea is to provide skills and knowledge opportunities that would avoid constant

encounters between young girls and miners. These empowerment initiatives have to be through mentorship programmes that have the potential of connecting young girls with positive role models in their respective communities.

Further context-based researches on the prevalence of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities should be conducted. Whilst available literature falls short of credit in explaining the causes of sexual abuse, the aim of further research is to investigate these causes and cover the loopholes. The recommendation is targeting child protection institutions and community-based organisations around the district such as SOS and governmental departments like the Department of Social Development (DSD).

Young girls should be empowered with the necessary information on their rights to build their confidence and agency to speak out against GBV and challenge social norms that drive sexual abuse in small-scale mining communities. The idea is to provide skills and knowledge opportunities among young girls that will equip them with necessary resources needed to defend themselves.

Setting-based approaches to problem solving in as far as sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities is concerned should be employed. This implies that sexual abuse should be addressed distinctively according to setting as social experiences differ according to setting. This is an important approach based on the fact that it is difficult to employ urban areas strategies in peri-urban and emerging small-scale mining towns like Shamva.

Strict licensing and inspection rules should be initiated in mining communities to ensure safety and protection of young girls in small-scale mining communities . Having noted the influx of small-scale

miners in small-scale mining communities, the study recommends control of small-scale mining through strict licencing.

Mining laws should be incorporated in child protection frameworks. This integration, therefore, involves a multi-faceted approach that matches mining legislation with child protection and welfare provisions to create a comprehensive protective environment for young girls in small-scale mining communities. This would aid poor legal frameworks which have been discussed as one of the causes of sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities.

The mining sector must develop protection policies and procedures in line with international, regional and national standards to prevent and respond to sexual abuse in small-scale mining. This must include the establishment of safeguarding focal points in all hotspot mining. This implies the enforcement of existing laws that protect children from sexual abuse like the Children Act (Chapter 5:06), Amendment Number 8 and the National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children. This involves identifying gaps.

Community awareness programmes should be extended extensively to effectively apply setting-based approaches to problem solving in as far as sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities is concerned. The extensive implementation of educational campaigns designed to raise awareness about the of sexual abuse is essential in small-scale mining communities, thus, targeting community groups like miners, mine owners, local leaders to enforce a culture of support, care and caution.

Setting-based researches and evidence gathering on the major strategies that work to prevent and respond to sexual abuse among young girls in small-scale mining communities must be invested in and approaches that can be effectively scaled up identified.

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