

SILENCE AND SURVIVAL: EXPLORING MALE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND CARETAKERS' PERSPECTIVES IN IRINGA DISTRICT, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how and why power hierarchies and patriarchal structures contribute to the underreporting of male child sexual abuse in Iringa District. a total 12 participants were purposively selected for in-depth interview. The study adopted cross-sectional study design which facilitated interviewing caretakers, male child victims and key informants. The study used attachment theory to explain the phenomenon. The study found that authority of perpetrators, male-dominated justice systems, and economic dependence on perpetrators shapes silence in reporting male child sexual abuse. up on this finding the study concludes that it underscores the need for a holistic approach that integrates psychosocial, institutional and economic supports in child protection.

Keywords: Male Child Sexual Abuse (MCSA), Child Caretakers,

INTRODUCTION

Male child sexual abuse (MCSA) refers to situations where young male children are subjected to sexual abuse in various forms, including penetration and other non-consensual sexual acts (Archer, 2022). It has severe and lasting consequences on survivors, affecting them physically, psychologically, emotionally, and even spiritually (Archer, 2022). In Tanzania, multiple initiatives have been implemented to reduce and confront MCSA. These include provision of education in schools, nationwide media campaigns, legal initiatives such as the Law of the Child Act of 2009, as well as interventions by religious institutions and community-based organizations (Babune, & Salum, 2024). These efforts aim to reduce or eradicate MCSA and other forms of violence against children.

Despite these initiatives, existing evidence indicates a rising trend of MCSA cases in Tanzania (Mbunda & Nyaki, 2024). For example, official data between 2020 and 2025 show an alarming increase in reported cases, with Iringa District consistently recording some of the highest numbers nationwide [citation]. This trend underscores an urgent need for more focused research in Iringa District. Although the existing body of knowledge highlights the prevalence and impacts of MCSA (Josia, 2024). little has been reported on how patriarchal structures and power hierarchies contribute to the underreporting of MCSA, particularly in rural and semi-urban districts such as Iringa.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the issue of MCSA is increasingly recognized as a serious but often overlooked public health and human rights concern. Emerging research reveals that a substantial proportion of male children have experienced sexual abuse. For instance, Kavenagh & Maternowska (2024) report that approximately 36.8% of male children have disclosed experiencing some form of sexual abuse. In Kenya, deeply entrenched cultural norms, societal attitudes, and traditional beliefs create significant barriers to justice, support, and healing for survivors (Johnson & Kimani, 2017). Among male children aged 13–17, about 12% report having been victims of sexual abuse, including unwanted sexual touching and attempted forced sex (Rezey & DiMeglio, 2024).

This pervasive culture of silence and shame surrounding male survivors deters reporting of incidents and fosters an environment of fear about potential repercussions from families, communities, and even the justice system (Johnson & Kimani, 2017). Moreover, patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and stigmatization of male victims further discourage disclosure and access to support services (Johnson & Kimani, 2017). Understanding these sociocultural and structural barriers is therefore essential to inform effective policies, legal frameworks, and survivor-centered interventions to combat MCSA in Tanzania and similar contexts.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative cross-sectional design, which was appropriate for exploring how power hierarchies and patriarchal structures shape silence in the reporting of male child sexual abuse in Iringa District. The cross-sectional design enabled the researcher to collect data from different categories of participants—male child survivors, caretakers, and key informants during the same study period. A qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and the contextual factors influencing underreporting.

A total of twelve (12) participants were purposively selected because of their direct knowledge or experience relevant to the study. The sample comprised four (4) male child survivors of sexual abuse, four (4) caretakers of male child survivors, and four (4) key informants from Iringa District. Recruitment was conducted in collaboration with a guardian teacher who assisted in identifying potential participants and facilitating their participation.

Data were collected exclusively through in-depth interviews conducted in private and safe settings to ensure confidentiality and to encourage openness. Each interview focused on eliciting detailed narratives and insights from participants, with probing used as needed to gain deeper understanding.

All interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with transcripts, systematic coding, identification of key themes, and interpretation of patterns that reveal how patriarchal structures and power hierarchies contribute to the underreporting of male child sexual abuse.

FINDINGS

Authority of Perpetrators

The social position and status of perpetrators strongly impede victims from reporting abuse. Many participants feared retaliation from perpetrators who were highly respected in the community and therefore considered “untouchable.”

“He is a respected elder in our village; everybody greets him with respect. If I even try to say something, no one would believe me because of who he is and how people admire him. I feel like my words would mean nothing compared to his position.” (Interview, boy aged 13 years)

Another participant connected the perpetrator’s power with direct fear of punishment and loss of schooling:

If I speak out, he can punish me. He has influence. He can even stop me from going to school or tell others bad things about me so that I am sent away. So, I keep quiet and just endure.” [Translated from Swahili]

During the in-depth interview, the guardian teacher at Kalenga Primary School disclosed:

These cases do reach us sometimes, and as teachers we really try to give full cooperation and follow up. But there is a certain stage where the cases just get stuck and honestly, we do not know why. It’s as if the power of some people is stronger than the process itself.” [Translated from Swahili]

Together these views illustrate how hierarchical power and social prestige protect perpetrators and silence victims.

Male-Dominated Justice Systems

Participants highlighted that the justice system itself is dominated by men who were raised in the same societal norms and values, which can affect their attitudes toward male victims. A social worker in Kalenga District described how children who seek justice encounter mostly male officials, especially at police gender desks:

“When children finally get the courage to go to the police or to someone who can help them, they find that the desk is full of men police officers, ward leaders. The same norms that exist in the community exist there. Sometimes, boys tell me that police laugh at them or say things like, ‘How can a boy be abused?’ so they just never go to report the cases.” [Translated from Swahili]

Another participant linked this to a lack of trust and internalized disbelief:

“We know they will not believe a boy. In their minds only girls can be victims, so why waste my time? I keep my story to myself.” (Interview, adolescent boy)

These narratives reveal that male-dominated justice structures and dismissive attitudes create structural barriers to justice and reinforce under-reporting.

Economic Dependence on Perpetrators

Economic dependence particularly financial support from perpetrators emerged as another powerful reason for silence. Participants explained that families sometimes rely on perpetrators for money to cover basic needs, such as school fees, food, or household bills.

“The perpetrator is the one who pays the school fees, and sometimes he also covers different bills at home when there is a need. Families fear that if they report him, all that assistance will stop, and the child will suffer even more. So, people maintain their silence, even though they know it is wrong.” (Social worker, Iringa District)

Another participant connected this to widespread poverty in the community:

“Families here are struggling. They choose to keep silent because they need the help. If they lose that help, the children might not go to school or might sleep hungry. It becomes a choice between justice and survival, and survival wins.” (Ward Executive Officer, Kalenga Ward)

These accounts demonstrate how economic ties and poverty maintain silence and hinder justice for male victims of sexual violence.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Authority of Perpetrators

Perpetrators frequently occupy positions of authority teachers, religious figures, and family elders so a child’s perception that the abuser is a legitimate authority translates into an attachment dilemma: the child must choose between the (perceived) safety of attachment to the authority and the reality of harm. Attachment theory explains why this produces silence: when the attachment system is bound up with the perpetrator, the child experiences disclosure as a betrayal of the only dependable bond and fears catastrophic relational loss. This mechanism is consistent with insights from O’Neil (2008), Kilmartin (2005), and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) about power and gendered authority. The implication is that authority structures are not neutral contexts but active enablers of secrecy; they transform abuse into an ongoing relational strategy for survival. Policy interventionists must therefore dismantle institutional conditions that permit unchecked authority: implement rigorous vetting and supervision of adults who work with children; establish independent safeguarding units in schools, religious institutions, and community organizations; create anonymous reporting mechanisms and whistleblower protections; and ensure that child-friendly investigative procedures prioritize the child’s attachment needs (consistent, single trusted contact persons, trauma-informed interview techniques) so that reporting does not re-traumatize the child. Structural accountability audits, transparent disciplinary processes, and community oversight will reduce the protection that authority currently affords perpetrators.

Male-Dominated Justice Systems

When justice systems are male-dominated or exhibit gendered bias, children especially boys anticipate disbelief, minimization, or even re-victimization when they seek legal recourse. Attachment theory suggests that interactions with justice actors are filtered through prior expectations of care and protection; if the system mirrors prior rejection or paternalistic control, it reactivates attachment fears and silences disclosure. Studies such as those by Moller and Huijbregts (2018), Stermac et al. (2014), and Dawgert and Riddle (2019) describe how institutional gender bias and procedural insensitivity compound survivors’ reluctance to come forward. The implication is double-edged: bias both reduces the likelihood of reporting and makes any reported case more painful, thereby reinforcing silence in others. Policy interventionists therefore should push for systemic reforms that make justice processes child-centered and gender-sensitive: mandatory training for police, prosecutors and judges on male victimization and childhood trauma; creation of specialized child protection units with trained, diverse staff; use of in-camera hearings, guarded testimony, and trauma-informed evidence collection; and legal aid services that are accessible and non-intimidating. Representation of women and survivors within justice institutions, and metrics that monitor outcomes by gender

and age, will help dismantle male dominance and make justice systems more credible to potential reporters.

Economic Dependence on Perpetrators

Economic dependence on perpetrators entrenches silence by adding material risk to the psychological cost-benefit calculation of disclosure. Attachment theory provides a relational texture: children in economically precarious households learn that caregiver approval and material security are tightly coupled, so disclosure that threatens the provider or that risks destabilizing household income can mean not only emotional loss but literal deprivation. This dynamic is well captured by intersectional analyses (Crenshaw, 1991) and empirical work on economic leverage (Wong et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2014) showing how poverty and dependency silence victims. The implication for policy is unequivocal: protective responses that ignore economic realities will fail because they do not remove the material disincentives to speak. Policy interventionists must therefore integrate economic supports into child protection strategies: short-term cash transfers and emergency support for families where disclosure risks immediate harm; longer-term livelihood programs and conditional social protection that reduce dependence on a single household member; safe housing options for families who separate from perpetrators; and legal protections that secure a child's access to basic needs irrespective of family dynamics. Economic empowerment programs should be designed in tandem with psychosocial support so that children and caregivers can reconfigure attachment expectations without being forced into economically impossible choices.

Across these themes the common thread is that silence about sexual abuse is not an individual moral failure but an adaptive response shaped by attachment histories and reinforced by gendered social structures. Implications for policy interventionists are therefore systemic and relational: interventions must simultaneously (1) repair and reconfigure attachment-relevant caregiving (through parenting programs, mentorship and therapeutic services), (2) transform gendered norms that valorize silence and toughness (through gender-transformative curricula and public campaigns), (3) reform institutions that concentrate unchecked authority and reproduce stigma (through safeguarding, legal reform, and independent reporting mechanisms), and (4) address the material conditions that lock families into dependence (through economic supports and social protection). Only by addressing the psychological (attachment), cultural (masculinity and taboo), institutional (authority and justice), and economic drivers together will policy interventionists create an environment in which disclosure is not only possible, but likely to result in protection and healing.

CONCLUSION

The study also shows how power hierarchies particularly the authority of perpetrators, male-dominated justice systems and economic dependence structure the costs of disclosure. When perpetrators are also attachment figures or authority figures, the child faces an impossible conflict between survival and self-protection. Male-dominated justice systems reinforce these fears by signalling that boys are unlikely to be believed or protected, while economic dependence on perpetrators ties disclosure to the risk of deprivation. This constellation of structural forces means that children's silence is an adaptive strategy rather than a personal failing. It underscores the need for a holistic approach that integrates psychosocial, institutional and economic supports in child protection.

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