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## Child Sexual Abuse and Situational Context: Children's Experiences in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda

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### ABSTRACT

Although substantial literature exists on child sexual abuse (CSA), little is known about abuses children encounter in northern Uganda, a post-conflict area. Media reports have indicated a high incidence for CSA. The study, firstly, explored boys' and girls' experiences of sexual abuse by adults in this post-conflict region and secondly, interventions directed at improving the current situation of children at risk of child abuse and the survivors were investigated as well. The study was guided by radical feminism and nested ecological framework theories. Semi-structured interviews were conducted involving 43 sexually abused children. Narrative responses were audio recorded and transcribed. Content qualitative analysis was used to understand sexual offenses from children's perspectives. Participants mentioned the following as the most perilous situations; laxity in parental roles, cultural norms, and practices, patriarchal attitudes, child sexual desires and attitudes, family breakdown and alcoholism. The study found many reported cases of CSA in the region. The results imply the exigent need of separate units specifically for reporting and handling child sexual offenses, need for personnel training on gender issues and filing system in child protection agencies and family programs for both fathers and mothers on child protection strategies for prevention and mitigation of CSA.

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Children; gender issues; sexual abuse; intervention

CSA is a serious social and public health problem worldwide. In Uganda, it remains the commonest form of child abuse. Gender continues to be a risk factor for CSA (Muhangi, 2017). In northern Uganda, earlier reports found that 32.4% of women first experienced sexual violence during childhood (MoGLSD, 2009). Girls are predominantly sexually abused by older males (Muhangi, 2017). Police records demonstrate an increasing trend of 25.8% of defilement cases reported in 2014 with 12,077 cases as compared to 9,598 cases registered in 2013 in Uganda (Uganda Police, 2014). CSA incorporates a variety of activities such as noncontact offenses and acts of varying physical intrusiveness (Wurtele, 2009). In Uganda, child sexual offenses are perceived differently for girls and boys

especially those that involve physical invasiveness. For example, under the Penal Code Act Cap.120, defilement applies to only girls under the age of 18 who have been subjected to sexual intercourse by an adult. On the other hand, the term indecent assault is often used to refer to boys of the same age when they are survivors of sexual abuse. That gender-biased explanation of sexual assault when it comes to boys and girls, greatly influences the way sexual assault is legally interpreted for CSA survivors, as well as the biased attitudes that society has toward the vice of defilement. In this paper, defilement has been applied to refer to sexual offenses committed against girls as is locally understood.

The increase in CSA in northern Uganda has led to more children contracting HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted diseases, increased child pregnancies, early marriages, and high school dropout rates (ANPPCAN, 2011). Much as there is a rise in CSA, children have been denied access to justice due to low prosecution rates (Uganda Police, 2014). CSA has thus remained both pervasive and persistent despite existing legislative, policy and practice initiatives to address it (Jones & Jemmott, 2014). The majority of CSA cases remain hidden, are heavily under-reported and some even never investigated to a great extent (Carmody & Carrington, 2000; Wright, 2011).

The occurrence of armed conflict in northern Uganda for two decades (1986–2006) exposed the population to massive violations of human rights and overwhelming acts of sexual violence against girls and women (Liebling-Kalifani, Ojiambo-Ochieng, Marshall, Were-Oguttu, & Musisi, 2008). The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) engaged in the harshest war tactics including the killing of parents as their children watched and vice versa, abductions of children, sexual slavery and forced marriages (Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2008). The rebel activities disrupted the harmonious and patriarchal family systems of the Acholi people (Olema, Catani, Ertl, Saile, & Neuner, 2014). Children in the present continue to suffer sexual-related abuses and spread of HIV/AIDS. Studies on the conflict in northern Uganda indicate that girls suffered most the burden of sexual abuse and bore children to rebels (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2013). The formerly abducted girls on re-integration into their communities were often times ostracized and were subjected to denials of marriages and other livelihoods opportunities (McKay, Robinson, Gonsalves, & Worthen, 2006). Some studies link child maltreatment experiences lived during the war to parental vulnerability transition due to the breakdown of culture and social support (Olema et al., 2014). According to Olema et al. (2014), the war drove almost 80% of the population in northern Uganda into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The life experiences in the camps led to family breakdown, child marriages and severe poverty (Liebling-Kalifani et al., 2008). Using radical feminism perspective and nested ecological framework theories as guiding frameworks, this study explored the situational context of the sexual offenses from the survivors' perspective.

From a radical feminist perspective, CSA has been ascribed to unequal power relationships between females and males and adults and children (Hanisch &

Moulding, 2011; Solomon, 1992). Sexual abuse of children is largely of females by sexual offenders who are male adults (Solomon, 1992). However, female perpetrators comprise a significant proportion of sexual victimization (Stemple, Flores, & Meyer, 2017). Also, in a 2015 study, McLeod presents a 21% female involvement in primary roles related to child sexual offenses. Sexual practice is seen to be socially constructed around the male notions of desire and is a major area of male domination over females (Walby, 1990). Zawacki, Abbey, Buck, McAuslan, and Clinton-Sherrod (2003) indicate that men who have committed sexual assault more strongly endorse gender role stereotypes that men are pursuers of sex and women are gatekeepers.

The nested ecological framework theory is widely used to explain child abuse and neglect (CAN). The theory presents the child's environment as a series of nested and interconnected systems (Belsky, 1980). The framework offers a comprehensive outlook of CSA by considering risk factors at multiple levels (individual, family, peer, community and society levels). The framework is helpful in the explanation of individual risk factors within several interactions at multiple levels (Belsky, 1980). The individual-level risk factors include childhood sexual experiences and individual behaviors (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). Ecologically, the development of sexual behaviors is influenced by interactions at different levels. In previous studies, sexually aggressive behaviors are influenced by different motivations which include hostile masculinity (Carmody, 1997; Malamuth, Heavey, & Linz, 1996), male dominating attitudes toward females (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Hanisch & Moulding, 2011), exercising of traditional male gender roles that relates to aggressiveness, rape supportive attitudes (Abbey, McAuslain, Zawachi, Clinton, & Buck, 2001; Carmody, 1997) and non-intimacy based approach to sexual interactions (Malamuth et al., 1996).

The relations within the family, among peers and other immediate situations that allow direct interactions and associations are embraced in the second level of ecology. These environments in some studies are viewed as avenues for reinforcement of rape-supportive norms among peers through hostile talk about women (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). It could as well be an avenue for peer approval of forcing sex on females using coercive tactics to gain sex or casual talks about sexual behavior by sexually assaultive men (Abbey et al., 2001). At the community and society level, evidence supports social tolerance of eroticizing children, unequal power relationships between men and women (Wondie, Zemene, Tafesse, Reschke, & Schröder, 2011) and patriarchal and rape-supportive social norms, poverty, social tolerance for violence and lack of accountability for perpetrators (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). The radical feminist portrayal of unequal power relations of men and women as ascribed to CSA are ecologically related to various risk factors associated with the sexual assault of children. The aim of this paper is to present gender experiences in situations of CSA occurrences and to explore the efficacy of available interventions. This paper is part of the bigger study that aims

at gender analysis on CAN, focusing on exigencies in the post-conflict northern Uganda.

## Method

### *Sample*

The study was carried out in the three districts of Gulu, Kitgum, and Lira in the northern region of Uganda. The three districts were among the districts which experienced the direct impact of the war between Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the government of Uganda's Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) which lasted for a period of 20 years (1986–2006). The districts are also among those with the highest reports of sexually related offenses involving children (Uganda Police, 2014). In total, the study included 43 sexually abused children aged from 6 to 17 years ( $N = 43$ ,  $N = 41$  girls and  $N = 2$  boys) whose cases were reported to three district central police stations. The survivors were from Kitgum ( $N = 17$ , 40%), Gulu ( $N = 14$ , 33%) and Lira ( $N = 12$ , 28%). All the survivors of sexual abuse between 6 and 17 years old were purposively selected and had either reported or had their cases reported to the Uganda Police Force.

Children below the age of 6 years and those with mental disorders were excluded as they could not express themselves. Children fell in different age groups: 6–9-year-olds ( $N = 6$ , 14%), 10–13-year-olds ( $N = 7$ , 16%) and 14–17-year-olds ( $N = 30$ , 69.8%). In terms of religion, the proportions were: Catholics ( $N = 29$ , 67%) Anglicans ( $N = 9$ , 21%), Pentecostals ( $N = 3$ , 7%) and Moslem ( $N = 2$ , 5%). The school attendance status for the survivors was: children in school ( $N = 19$ , 44%) and those who had dropped out ( $N = 24$ , 56%). The survivors' homestead localities were urban setting ( $N = 20$ , 41%) and rural ( $N = 23$ , 53%). The parental marital status was; the children whose parents were married ( $N = 8$ , 19%), those whose parents were separated ( $N = 11$ , 26%), those whose parents were never married ( $N = 7$ , 16%), those whose parents were cohabiting ( $N = 5$ , 12%), those who had either of their parents deceased ( $N = 6$ , 14%) and those whose both parents had died ( $N = 6$ , 14%). The status of the survivors' homesteads relative to others was: children living in very isolated households ( $N = 5$ , 12%), those from households in vicinity of few households ( $N = 9$ , 21%), and those from households with numerous other households in their vicinity ( $N = 29$ , 67%).

### *Procedures*

Prior to the start of the interview, the interviewers sought consent from the caregivers of children identified as potential participants in the study.

Participants had to be children aged 6–17 years who had been sexually abused, and the case reported to Uganda Police Force. Further, an assent was requested from the minors after explaining thoroughly the purpose of the study and assuring the participants confidentiality. Research assistants were social work graduates, all fluent in both *Luo* and English languages, and they were all trained in advance in order not to deviate in the interpretation of the questionnaires. They participated in pretesting the tools. All interviews were captured on voice recorders. Interviews explored situations under which the sexual offenses occurred, and the nature of the interventions received as perceived by the participants. The research assistants were given a guide on open-ended survey questions to have participants narrate their experiences of the sexual abuse and would allow spontaneous experiences so as to enrich and deepen participants' responses. All girls were interviewed by only females and boys by a male in order to allow gender-sensitive information to emerge. Interviews were completed in the range of 50 to 80 min each.

### ***Data analysis***

All interviews were audiotape-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the two research assistants involved in data collection and verified by the principal investigator (PI) and the other two coauthors. The use of qualitative content analysis served as a guiding framework for this study. This involved both inductive and deductive approaches (Patton, 2002; Thomas, 2006). The use of an inductive approach helped in detailed reading of the raw data to derive themes (Thomas, 2006). The raw data involved interview transcripts and field notes. Transcripts were distributed to the three research assistants involved in data collection independently and repeatedly read to identify themes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Joint discussions with research assistants were held to compare themes and subthemes that were identified. The responses were again jointly read to develop agreeable codes in the reflection of the exact thoughts of the respondents and their meanings. This process led to the development of a cohesive list of codes that were used in data analysis. The coding of the data involved steps that ranged from specific to generalized coding of data. A deductive approach was at some stage involved in the analysis. This was done to relate the identified categories in the data to individual risk factors related to CSA within the socio-cultural environment (Belsky, 1980) and unequal power relations ascribed to CSA (Hanisch & Moulding, 2011).

After obtaining agreeable codes, a table of codes was developed for all authors to review. The main categories were underlined and defined using the coding guide that was jointly developed. The definitions of these categories helped to obtain criteria for inclusion and exclusion for each of the categories. Using the coding guide, some categories were expanded or even combined to achieve a higher category. Each transcript was coded by a minimum of two research

assistants for consistency and thereafter a discussion would be held. From the analysis of the categories, the composure of concepts is a reflection of the ecological model and radical feminism perspectives. Quotations from the transcripts are provided in the results.

## **Results**

The region which was hit by war for two decades left the population in extreme poverty and the children are mostly affected. Children were prone to CSA at any time. Girls were more sexually abused than boys and most sexual perpetrators are known to the survivors who oftentimes relocate to other unfamiliar places for fear of being arrested. Tracing the sexual perpetrators remains majorly the responsibility of the family of the survivor and is normally constraining. There were six categories of situations suggested for CSA occurrence and their respective sub-categories with some responses falling in more than one category.

### ***Laxity in parental roles***

Children under this category described how inadequate parental care and/or lack of it was a favorable situation for perpetrators to exploit. Some children in this category had their parents and others had both parents' deceased. In whichever scenario, perpetrators knew the survivors and had knowledge about the circumstances affecting the children. This category was further sub-divided to include situations where perpetrators exhibited love on the one hand and/or children being left at home unattended for a long duration, both of which kindled the risk and vulnerability to sexual assaults. Both sub-categories reflect gender and sexual experiences that evolved from situations.

### ***Love and care exhibited by perpetrators***

Most children reported not having caring and loving caregivers and some had lost their parents. The majority of children in this sub-category had dropped out of school due to lack of school fees and this situation in children's perception was attributed to not being cared for and/or loved by caregivers. The yearning to be loved and cared for set children up for sexual assault.

A 28-year-old man promised that he is going to pay my school fees, provide me food and pay for my brothers and since I have no parents and my uncle does not care, I also accepted. This man slept with me three times and when I got pregnant, he disappeared. My uncle who is my caregiver does not love me or even care. I reported to the para-social worker so as to get assistance and she reported the case to the police. The police tried to look for

this man and arrested him. This man promised that when he comes out of custody, he will keep his promise and he was released. But he never provided anything after he was released from custody. I gave birth to this baby girl while I am 13 years and I am helpless (Interview with a 13-year-old girl).

### ***Children habitually left at home alone***

Children under this sub-category reported that their parents were never at home. Parents left home early and only returned late in the night. Children were always left at home alone and it was described as a risky situation that made them vulnerable to the perpetrators. Children reported that perpetrators always took advantage when parents were not at home. Children tended to be deceived and ended up in the perpetrators' hands.

We are always left alone to play with other children of the neighbors and this made this man called OS to defile me after he had learned that both my parents are never at home during the day. Our parents are always too busy with their work. So OS decided to call me to follow him inside the house, on reaching he started having sex with me. My mother found me crying while blood was flowing from my private parts. I was then taken for a medical checkup and the case was taken to police. We were promised that this man will be arrested the moment he is got. But he disappeared (Interview with a 6-year-old girl).

### ***Cultural norms and practices***

Children in this category described how parents have for habitation a traditional hut separate from that of their children. Traditional huts were observed to be commonest housing style in the study area. It is culturally unacceptable for children to share the same traditional hut with parents. Children reported scenarios where both boys and girls shared the same traditional huts and to some children, single beds were shared by both gender and this was reported to be risky. Girls were especially more vulnerable to sexual advances from male relatives. This category was sub-divided to have children's experiences in situations that were risky and made the children vulnerable to sexual assault.

### ***Housing***

The grass thatched huts were the commonest and most affordable traditional way of shelter. These huts do not have rooms inside and therefore this made them unsuitable for parents to share with children who have cognitively grown. The children reported that the preferred setting for a household would be at least a total of three huts; one for parents another for girls and then boys. However, some households could not afford the ideal setting and thus children who shared the same hut with their parents reported hearing their parents engaging in sexual activities. Both boys and girls reported



sharing the same traditional hut and, in some situations, the same bed and this turned to be risky and exposed them to sexual assault.

When my mother separated with my father, my father brought my grandmother to stay at home. My grandmother came with one boy B who is a son to one of her brothers. B would sleep in a separate grass thatched house from ours and my stepmother used to send me to take him food in the house where he was sleeping. One day, B grabbed me and pushed me on his bed (narrated as she was bitterly crying) when I had taken him food. He forcefully had sex with me. I told my father who in turn reported him to police and he was arrested (Interview with a 12-year-old girl).

### **Bed sharing**

In households with two traditional huts, one is usually reserved for parents and the other one for children. In this category, children described how parents could afford to construct only two traditional huts and provide a few beddings. Boys and girls share the same hut and a single bed including cousins on visits or any other distant relative of the same age group. This was reported to be risky especially to children who already have sexual feelings and could succumb to sexual advances.

We were sleeping in our children's house, four of us; my brother (11 years), my cousin sister (15 years), K (16 years) who is my cousin and myself (13 years). In the middle of the night, K started touching me and came closer when others were deep asleep, and we had sexual intercourse. After 1 week, he visited us again. This time, he told me to sleep next to him and we had sex again then I became pregnant but kept it to myself. I was very shy and ashamed of reporting my cousin. But my parents got to know but preferred to discuss it with parents of K. K was reported to the police and was arrested but my father went and told police to release him. I am now 7-months pregnant (Interview with a 13-year-old girl).

When the sexual act occurs among related individuals, rituals are performed as a cultural prerequisite to cleanse the curse of incest.

I share a house with a boy (12 years) who is related to my step-father. One night, he demanded for sex, but I refused, and he used force and had sexual intercourse with me. I reported him to my mother and there was a family gathering whereby people from my mother's side came and the boy was warned never to repeat what he did. A sheep was killed in order to perform a ritual because he is like a brother to me and this was considered an act of incest. He was reported to police but the case was handled at family level since there was a need to cleanse the curse (Interview with a 7-year-old girl).

Traditionally, incest is resolved through performing a ritual known as *tumu kir* which involves slaughtering a sheep, in order to prevent bad luck from befalling the culprits. In this ritual, the culprits are instructed to swallow raw pieces of sheep's liver, a distasteful experience done as a deterrent against repeating that act.

### ***Patriarchal attitudes***

Children in this category described how men schemed avenues of getting girls and forced them into sexual acts and, in addition, intimidated them to remain silent. Most of the perpetrators reported were known to children and they either ambushed or pretended to be helping children in some way. Most sexual assault occurrences were registered on market days. A market day is a special day which occurs once a month in the community at a place designated for selling and buying household items and agricultural produce. Other occurrences were on occasions when children had gone to fetch water from far distances and/or found alone walking in the evening or early in the night. These were reported among the most insecure circumstances for girls. For purposes of analyzing children's experiences, this category was subdivided into the use of force and coercion and intimidation to maintain silence as enforced by perpetrators.

### ***Use of force and coercion***

Perpetrators were reported for exerting a lot of force on girls causing injuries to the survivors. The majority of children in this category met the perpetrators while they had been sent by caregivers for various errands. The children reported that perpetrators grabbed and carried them to hidden places or nearby bushes and sexually assaulted them.

I was sent to the market by my mother to buy books and on my way back, I met two boys and they tried to stop me, then I refused. The two carried me by force to the bush and started raping me. When I heard people passing, I shouted loudly at once. They came and rescued me. I reported to my father and then together we went to the Local Council One (LC1) officials and to the subcounty. These boys were arrested very early in the morning of the following day. They are now in jail (Interview with a 15-year-old girl).

Some male's tendency of envisioning females for sexual objects hinders children's protection from sexual assaults. Such males perceive females as sex providers whether on request or by force, irrespective of whether the survivor is a child or an adult.

My stepmother chased me away from home at night and I started off to go and look for my mother. Along the way, some man got me on the way and defiled me forcefully. It was in the dark, therefore I could not recognize the man. I went back home crying with injuries but instead, I was beaten. The following day, I went very early to my mother and told her. I was taken to LC1, then to police and hospital. The perpetrator could not be found. I was given treatment as I was severely injured in my private parts (Interview with a 6-year-old girl).

### ***Intimidation and maintenance of silence***

Children in this category were repeatedly defiled and were often threatened to conceal information concerning the sexual assaults.

Whenever, I would go to fetch water, there was this boy who would disturb me. He would tell me to follow him and then he starts to have sex with me. He told me never to tell anyone or else he would stab me with a knife and kill me. But one day, I told my stepmother and she reported to LC1 and then to the police. I was examined in the hospital and the boy was arrested and the case even went to court (Interview with a 7-year-old girl).

### ***Child sexual desires and attitudes***

All the children under this category were 14–17 years old. Children described how they had strong sexual feelings for the perpetrators. They described how they believed in promises proposed by the perpetrators. Some of the perpetrators described were boyfriends and men who promised marriage to the survivors. In order to analyze children's experiences, this category was divided into two sub-categories with one where children were lured into sexual action and the other where they expected material gain.

#### ***Lured into sexual action***

Children in this category described how it was difficult to control feelings in sexual relationships. Survivors were girls and described how they were convinced and enticed by the perpetrators into sexual engagements. Most children in this sub-category, described how they hoped for improved life if they offered sex to their perpetrators.

He asked me for love, and I accepted. When I saw the boy, I just liked him. He had sex with me once and I got pregnant and I had hoped for a good life. I now stay with a well-wisher who found me along the way stranded looking for the boy. The well-wisher helped me to report to the police but then the boy disappeared. My parents chased me that I am a shame to the family and they don't even talk to me (Interview with a 16-year-old girl).

#### ***Material gain***

Early marriages are still common in the area. Female children described how they are expected to get married and the majority in this category were harassed by household members for failure to meet their own needs as girls. The majority described how their caregivers were referring to them as burdens in the home.

On many occasions, my mother asks me when I am getting married so that she is relieved of my demands (Interview with a 15-year-old girl).

### **Family breakdown**

Children described how their parents separated and remarriages affected the children's lives. Coping becomes difficult for both mothers and children without a father's support. For children to survive, they either support their mothers or cater for their needs on their own. Children described how perpetrators lured them by providing them with simple items. Girls were provided with money, and boys were provided with food prior to the sexual assault. The survivors described how sexual assault carried a lot of stigma especially for boys because it involved older women and is perceived as *gwok* (taboo) in the community. Boys described how they dropped out of school following the sexual assault because of unbearable stigma. For purposes of analyzing boys' experiences, this category focused on the change of family setting.

### **Remarriages of parents**

The loss of a father's support alters the whole family setting and family life changes completely. Children described how parents' remarriages caused drastic changes in the parent-child relationship. Children described how they became helpless after parents remarried and had to survive on their own. Perpetrators often exploited the situation by sexually assaulting them.

Our father left for another woman when I was 14 years. We remained with our mother and many times slept without food. Our mother is not loved by our paternal relatives so we could not even report him for not providing for us. Whenever we would go to our father to ask for money for food, he would tell us we did not leave any money with him. Together with our mother, we started cultivating in people's gardens in exchange for food. One day, S (perpetrator) aged 55 years, called me to her place and she gave me eggs to eat. After eating the eggs, I started developing sexual feelings for her. I did not have feelings before for any girl maybe it was because I ate her eggs. She started touching my male organ and I erected then I had sex with her. I slept at her home on many occasions. I could wait when my mother had gone to sleep then I go to her home. This lasted for 10 months and on a daily basis without anybody knowing about it. Later, our neighbor got to know and told my father. Then, my father came one night and entered S's house without even knocking and found us having sex. S was caught and taken to the police straight and she is now in prison. I stopped going to school because of stigma (Interview with a 15-year-old boy).

The sense of motherhood became a myth in situations where mothers remarried with the hope of receiving financial support from their next husbands. The mothering role slackened. Children also succumbed to tempting and luring tactics by perpetrators.

A 29-year-old woman signaled me to her rented grass-thatched house in the evening at around 7:00 pm. When my father died, my mother remarried, and

I started to care for myself. So, I had just sold my cotton at shillings 20,000/ = (equivalent to USD 5) and on my way home, this woman saw me when I was selling in the trading center and called me with a signal. When I entered her house, she locked the door and started touching my body. She took me to her bed and induced me to play sex with her. It was my first time to be touched. I was locked in the house for 5 days. I used to urinate and defecate in the bucket and she would empty it in the night. She would buy nice food like meat, rice, and eggs using my money. I don't know who told my brother but somehow, he got to know and reported to the police. Police came to her house and told her to open and I was found inside. She was arrested and taken to police and was imprisoned. Up to now, I do not feel okay and I stopped school because of what happened. I was very much ashamed and everybody in this community knows that I slept (had sexual intercourse) with an old woman. I fear other children at school because they insult me about that incident. I now keep home and I very much fear women (Interview with a 13-year-old boy).

### ***Alcoholism***

Alcoholism was mentioned by the majority of children as a risk for child maltreatment from children's perspectives. In cases of children sexually abused by relatives, alcohol was mentioned, and children described how their caregivers would return home very drunk, were quarrelsome and violent and sometimes the parents came with their lovers. Children described how they were sometimes forced to sleep at the neighbors' homes and others in the bush for fear of being attacked by their drunk caregivers. In order to analyze the experiences of children, this category was sub-divided into a betrayal of trust and maliciousness.

### ***Betrayal of trust***

Children described how their male relatives sexually assaulted them. Girls described how the separation of their parents made them vulnerable. Close relatives they trusted would sexually abuse them under the influence of alcoholism. The female sexual survivors described how they dropped from school to keep the homes in the absence of their mothers. Children described how, at night, they waited for their male relatives whom they served food on returning home.

My father used to come back home late in the night every day. We would wait for him. One day, he came back and found me with my sister, a 7-year-old sleeping at night. I woke up to open for him. He had previously separated with my mother. Then, he started holding me very tight and forcing me to sleep with him and have sex with him. After he finished having sex with me, he told me not to tell anyone and not even to go out. I pretended as if I was going to urinate but instead, I escaped and went to our neighbors and told them. I slept at the neighbors' place and in the morning, we went to LC1 and reported, then went to police and hospital. I was admitted at a hospital and

after I was discharged, I was taken to my mother at my grandmother's home. My father has never been arrested over this. He disappeared (Interview with an 11-year-old girl defiled by father).

### ***Maliciousness***

Children described how relatives who are HIV positive were malicious and would get drunk, defiled the children leaving both girls and boys at risk. Children described how such perpetrators pretended to be helpful to children but assaulted them when parents were absent.

A brother to my mother was coming from selling our products and told me to give him food. My mother was not around. When I brought him food, he grabbed me and had sex with me. He warned me not to shout, that he would strangle me if I attempted to make noise. It was around 8:00 pm in the night. He was drunk and I think he wanted to transmit HIV because he knows he is sick. I reported to my paternal uncles, who in turn, also reported to police. He was arrested but has not been arraigned in court yet (Interview with a 14-year-old girl).

### ***CSA interventions***

Children described their experiences with interventions such as reporting to the police, medical examination at governmental hospitals and counseling which was done occasionally. Not all children were satisfied with the processes involved in the interventions. The players identified as key in interventions were the LC1 officials, para-social workers (community members who volunteer to identify and report child abuse), police and health-care providers. Most children would report first to either LC1 officials or para-social workers to be assisted in reporting to police. On the other hand, others reported to police directly. Children described how the sexual act had to be proved first by going through a medical checkup and this would be permitted only after presenting Form-3 (a document supplied and filled at the police station where the complaint was entered). This is a form which the survivors must get from police for free and indicates that the survivor alleges to have been sexually abused and should be medically examined to prove that s/he had a sexual contact within specified hours. This examination was done for free. The medical report findings provide a basis for weighing the intensity of the sexual offense committed by the perpetrator, and whether the case proceeds to court or not.

### ***Satisfaction with intervention***

Children who were satisfied described the procedure as friendly especially where perpetrators were arrested or even imprisoned. Children described how their hope for the future was boosted to know their HIV status and receiving of post-exposure

prophylaxis (PEP). Most of these children received basic counseling from community members such as elders, religious leaders, and para-social workers.

### ***Dissatisfaction with intervention***

Children whose perpetrators were not arrested were disgruntled and even remained in fear of more attacks. Children described how the procedures were not friendly and instead left them disappointed. Some Uganda police officials requested for money, as a bribe, to get form-3 which they could not afford and would give up instead. In some instances, children were told by police to search for their perpetrators in order to have them arrested. This was at a risk of being harmed. The interpretation of defilement by law enforcers is perceived differently according to girls' age groups. Aggravated defilement applied to sexual offenses involving girls of 13 years and below and simple defilement applied to sexual offenses involving girls between 14 and 17 years. Children described how their cases were collapsed due to the interference of negotiations between their caregivers and perpetrators. Children also described how they were asked embarrassing questions at police posts in the presence of many people and instead they felt ashamed.

LC1 and police asked me many questions and people were many. Other questions were very hard and embarrassing to answer like 'did he really push his penis inside your vagina or it remained outside?' Such questions were very humiliating to me and I felt like crying (Interview with a 15-year-old girl).

## **Discussion**

CSA is both a tragic and harmful experience to the identity of the survivor. The experience leaves traces of abhorrent and painful remembrances that are extremely difficult to manage (Reavey & Brown, 2007). CSA incidents from the stated children's narratives in the current study left devastating outcomes. Most survivors experienced shame, self-rejection, teenage pregnancies and dropped out of school for fear of stigma. Sexual violence toward children in this study could be explained by unequal power relationships between adults and children and the culture of male sexual aggressive behaviors toward girls. From the radical feminist perspective, the sexual abuse of children is not simply an expression of sexuality but also of power (Solomon, 1992). This agrees with study findings where the survivors were engaged into sex forcefully by strangers, were threatened to keep silent following the assault, and enticed with material things.

In this study, laxity in parental roles and family breakdown as contributory to CSA implies disruption of gender roles. The laxity was exhibited in the lack of childcare and deprivation of basic needs. Radical feminists attribute childcare to mothers and home provision and protection to fathers (Turney, 2000). Breakdown of families resulting from men's failure to provide for their

families and women's failure to keep the homes was a common finding among CSA cases. This finding concurs with other studies that family breakdown exposes children to a greater risk of CSA (Sammut, 2014). The findings indicated disruptions in power relations after father's failure to provide and absence of mothers in homes while seeking for other survival strategies. This exposed children to riskier environments. Power relations in northern Uganda got disrupted due to a combination of prolonged war and devastating conditions of IDP camps (Anderson, 2009). The findings revealed that girls are perceived not only as children but also as females who can satisfy male sexual urges. This finding portrays unequal power structures and power relations between children and adults which is linked to CSA in other studies (Karlsson & Karkara, 2003). The nested ecological framework theory helps to explain sexual violence at community and society levels as a characteristic of extreme patriarchal social structures (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). At the family level, homes characterized with parental alcoholism and absence of one parent or both in the family, emerged as risk factors to CSA. In other studies, parental alcoholism has been previously linked to CSA (Abbey et al., 2001).

CSA is a continuing crisis in the post-conflict region with gender differences in interventions. Interventions are strategies that aim to stop child maltreatment and to minimize the negative consequences for the child, family, and society (Geeraert, Noortgate, Van Den Grietens, & Onghena, 2004). The child protection system in Uganda is comprised of institutions and agencies which provide interventions at different levels. These consist of the Uganda police, courts of law, local governments and local leaders at the community level and often assisted by child-focused Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Ecologically, sexual assault is a complex phenomenon caused by multiple factors both across and within perpetrators (Abbey et al., 2001). In the current study, societal-sanctioned gender role beliefs were evident in the justification for defilement and not for indecent assault. More so, the legal interpretation of child sexual offenses is different for girls (defilement) and boys (indecent assault). From the radical feminism perspective, males are socio-culturally conditioned to be dominant and powerful in sexual relationships (Ward & Hudson, 2001) and children, especially the girls, are more vulnerable. The male perpetrators reported to the police and arrested, had the ability to negotiate or bribe some officers, consequently, would have their cases dropped before prosecution in the courts of law. This finding concurs with a previous study that the punishment handed down to perpetrators is not deterrent enough (Gwirayi, 2013). For female perpetrators, the case was different due to the cultural and gender beliefs that females rarely pursue males for sex, thus, this made negotiating for their release before trial difficult. Also, it is unbelievable that women can commit sexual offenses against children. This is in agreement with another study which suggests that cultural expectations hinder the identification of sexual crimes



committed by females (Strickland, 2008). Although female sexual perpetration was previously thought to be less widespread, recent studies support the fact that females constitute a significant portion as sexual assault perpetrators (McLeod, 2015; Stemple et al., 2017). Interventions were often compromised in case of simple defilement because perpetrators would find it easier to have their cases withdrawn before trial. The legal institutions provided more lenient sentences for sexual perpetrators in simple defilement than aggravated defilement. This strategy, although entrenched in the law, is likely to maintain the occurrence of CSA in the region.

Records on child sexual offenses are still poor according to the findings of the study. Although the media and police reports show an increasing trend in sexual abuse (Muhangi, 2017), the findings indicated shortcomings in handling child sexual offenses. Gwirayi (2013) observed that existing laws in Africa that are meant for safeguarding children against sexual violence are weak. In the current study, the system of handling CSA offenses was characterized by situations where CSA offenses were handled in same offices and by similar personnel as other offenses. Children always shied away from reporting to the same police offices and personnel for fear of being publicly interrogated and humiliated. In addition, details of the survivors and perpetrators were not well captured thus making efforts to trace and follow up cases very difficult. To complicate this, caregivers of survivors preferred that sexual offenses with cultural implications (for example, where the perpetrator was closely related to the survivor) be handled at LC1 even after reporting to police. This meant that the handling of these cases through to prosecution was not always clear cut.

Children preferred to keep the sexual offenses committed against them a secret because of shame and stigma involved when reported to the authorities. Similarly, studies elsewhere show that sexually abused individuals are less likely to share their trauma during childhood than in adulthood (Abbey et al., 2001; Karlsson & Karkara, 2003). Although girls were most vulnerable, both gender felt shame intensified by reporting to police and this is similar to a previous study (Karlsson & Karkara, 2003). In the current study, all boys were sexually assaulted by single women who were living alone and did not have biological children. A previous study indicates that use of CSA by female offenders is a means to address various feelings and unmet needs like anger, loneliness, and needs for affection and attention (Grayston & Luca, 1999). The findings also indicated that perpetrators used a number of strategies to gain access to children ranging from giving simple items to promises for school fees providence and promises of a hand in marriage. The current study agrees with a previous study that sexual perpetrators view children as sexual objects to exploit for sexual satisfaction (Ward & Hudson, 2001).

CSA takes place in homes and elsewhere in the community. A study on children's situation in Uganda indicates that children's sexual offenses take place within their homes and schools and are inflicted by family members or visitors to the child's family (UNICEF, & MoGLSD, 2015). In the current study, findings

indicated that neighbors were most implicated in CSA. This study established that CSA takes place anywhere in the community and often perpetrators were of advanced age and were known to the survivors. Cases involving relatives as perpetrators would hardly proceed to court for prosecution. Other studies indicate that sexual assault cases that are reported to police involve strangers (Abbey et al., 2001). Although the sexual assault was reported in all cases studied, this was done after repeated occurrences in some of them and it was always initiated and encouraged by an adult. The culture of silence and not reporting cases of CSA on first encounter was a common practice for fear of the perpetrators and the humiliation to the survivor. In another study, silence was attributed to fear of the consequences of reporting against cultural sex role expectations (Karlsson & Karkara, 2003). The roles of LC1 officials and para-social workers in child protection were well defined as, to identify sexual offenses, record and refer survivors to police for professional support. Similarly, other studies indicate that child protection committees (CPCs) were formed and members were trained to create awareness about child protection issues, to monitor and refer child violations (Muhangi, 2017). Gwirayi (2013) recommends disclosure of child sexual perpetrators to regulate unacceptable sexual behaviors in Zimbabwe. In our study, the release and disappearance of perpetrators before trial in the majority of cases undermined intervention efforts. To our knowledge, this is the first study capturing CSA survivors' voices in a post-conflict setting and an analysis of the intervention mechanisms in a CSA endemic setting.

## **Conclusion and policy implications**

Understanding CSA in a post-war region from the offended perspective helps to design appropriate policy and community interventions that may foster prevention of the vice among the population at risk. There is a need to strengthen preventive interventions of CSA which would result in improved mitigation measures. The procedures involved in the establishment of proof of evidence of sexual act leaves the child more vulnerable. There is a lack of privacy involved in reporting and children find difficulties in responding to sensitive questions when the environment is unfavorable. It was common for survivors to report CSA after repeated occurrences and this was attributed to fear and intimidation from perpetrators and this had an effect on timely interventions. The disappearance of files and poor record keeping frustrate proceedings of cases and motivation for reporting the new cases. The results from the study indicate an urgent need for separation of child sexual offenses from other crimes while reporting to Uganda police to encourage reporting by children, families, and communities. Also needed is training on gender and filing system for personnel in positions responsible for handling child sexual offenses and other maltreatment issues at all levels. Lastly, the need for family programs that target both fathers and mothers is key in the promotion of family values and obligations. Therefore, child protection

practitioners need holistic and gender-sensitive approaches to strengthen both preventive and response strategies for the mitigation of CSA occurrence.

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## Disclosure of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest to report.

## Ethical Standards and Informed Consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with ethical standards of responsible communities on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed assent was obtained from caregivers of minors prior to all the interviews.

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