



Beyond Poverty: Why are Some Children more Vulnerable to Commercial Sexual Exploitation than Others?

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Abstract

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a conscience-wrenching problem that has become a pandemic feature of Zimbabwean society. Studies on CSEC have invested significant attention on identifying the factors that cause and perpetuate CSEC. There is a general consensus among studies that poverty is the main cause of CSEC. However, it is argued in this study that while the singular, dominant and generalised narrative that poverty is the main cause of CSEC is helpful, its deficiency is that it does not explain why some children are more vulnerable to CSEC than others. In order to address this question, this study examines how individual, family and societal risk factors cumulate in peculiar ways to make some children more vulnerable to CSE than others.

Résumé

L'exploitation sexuelle commerciale des enfants (ESEC) est un problème déchirant qui est devenu une caractéristique pandémique de la société zimbabwéenne. Les études sur l'ESEC ont accordé une attention considérable à l'identification des facteurs qui causent et perpétuent l'ESEC. En général, les études s'accordent que la pauvreté est la principale cause d'ESEC. Cependant, il est soutenu dans la présente étude que le récit unique, dominant et généralisé selon lequel la pauvreté est la principale cause de l'ESEC est utile, mais il n'explique pas pourquoi certains enfants sont plus vulnérables à l'ESEC que d'autres. Afin de répondre à cette interrogation, la présente étude examine comment les facteurs de risque individuels, familiaux et sociétaux s'agrègent de manière particulière pour rendre certains enfants plus vulnérables à l'ESI que d'autres.

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Introduction

Studies on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) agree that poverty is its primary cause (Albanese 2007; Bambara 2011; Compaore 2007; Coulibaly 2010; ECPAT 2014; ILO 2001; Perschler-Desai 2010). CSEC is 'one of poverty's most egregious outcomes' (Hoot *et al.* 2006:129) because absolute poverty forces children to 'make a conscious choice to earn money by selling sexual favour' (Perschler-Desai 2010:112).

In 2014, the Zimbabwe National Council for the Welfare of Children (ZNCWC) conducted a study on CSEC in Zimbabwe. The study found that children became victims of CSE because of familial poverty (87.7 per cent), breakdown of the family unit (23.5 per cent), gender based violence (7.2 per cent) and orphanhood (23.8 per cent). Seventy-five per cent of the children who participated in this study also expressed the view that poverty is the main cause of CSEC. For example, when asked why she became a victim of CSE, Angela (not her real name; this study uses pseudonyms throughout) said that: 'I am not here by choice; I am here because of poverty'. Responding to the same question, Ellen said that 'it was poverty which left me with prostitution as the only way to life'.

However, while the narrative that poverty is the main cause of CSEC is useful, it has a huge deficiency in that it misses the nuances and intricacies of CSEC, which this study seeks to address. This study found that certain groups of children are more vulnerable to CSE than others because of the peculiar accumulation of risk factors. If the peculiarities of how risk factors accumulate and force children to engage in sex work are examined on a case-by-case basis, it becomes clear that there are cumulative circumstances that make some children more vulnerable to CSE than others. For example, while it is true that children who are out of school are vulnerable to CSE, a deeper examination reveals that within this group, certain children are more vulnerable than others because of the peculiar accumulation of risk factors. These include how risk factors emerge from and interface with social, economic and cultural contexts and how they accumulate and affect children differently. It is therefore important to try and understand how risk factors cumulate to the point where they can leave children with commercial sex work as 'the only way to life'.

This is explored through the voices of the children and other stakeholders who participated in the study. The children who participated in this study were aged between 9 and 16 years old. Studies on CSEC found that the age at which most children become victims is between 12 and 14 years (Walker-Rodriguez and Hill 2011). However, in recent years, girls as young as 9 years old have also become victims of CSE (Palmer and Stacey 2002).

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated in childhood studies, with a particular focus on children's agency and wellbeing. This conceptual framing is important because it moves away from conceptualisations of how children are 'acted upon' by CSE. It focuses on the aspirations of children and how they articulate, perceive and respond to their circumstances. This enables children to contribute to the shaping of policies and programmes that promote their wellbeing and that of the larger society. Most African societies are characterised by the belief that children have limited rights, capacity and authority to fully participate in society (Ofosu-Kusi 2017). These moral notions of childhood can decimate the reflexivity and agency of children. Traditionally, conceptualisations of childhood and the lives and experiences of children were examined through the views of society's adult population. The result was that children's views were largely excluded from research processes. However, in recent decades, there has been increasing recognition of children as 'social agents' who have the agency to construct their own lives and to make sense of their social worlds. Children are 'active makers of social life' who exercise their agency to gain independence, to escape dysfunctional family and societal contexts and to seek to improve their material conditions (Ofosu-Kusi 2017). They have the agency to 'construct normality' in the midst of physical, material and emotional vulnerability (Manyeli 2017).

In recent decades, social interventions have been re-designed on the basis that children have agency and that they have the right to actively participate in decision-making processes (Bordonaro and Payne 2012). However, despite these positive developments, the question of children's agency continues to face enormous challenges. Bordonaro and Payne (2012) argue that children's agency is 'ambiguous' and 'convoluted', especially when applied to children who are victims of CSE because they are often perceived by society as repugnant. There is constant conflict between the acknowledgement of children's agency in social research and the antithetical moral notions of childhood that are embedded in societies (Bordonaro 2012). As a result, the voices of children are 'seldom heard (Hoot *et al.* 2006:129).

Studies also note that there are structural issues that erode the agency of girl children in particular. For example, structural violence, poverty and inequality have a 'gendered face', which affects men and women differently and disproportionately. Gender inequalities and relationship dynamics can create extreme forms of sexual vulnerabilities for children (Bhana 2017). African societies are characterised by hegemonic masculinities that legitimise

men's power over women and children. In countries such as South Africa, notions of male sexual entitlement and patriarchal dominance have fuelled vile sexual violence and abuse against women and children (Moosa and Bhana 2019). In order to realise their agency, girl children must be allowed the space to influence the situations around them, because they have the capacity to contest and act on their circumstances (Bhana 2017; Campbell and Mannell 2016).

Methodology

The study was conducted in Mabvuku, Epworth, Hatcliffe, Dzivarasekwa, Caledonia and Beit Bridge communities in Zimbabwe. These are high density urban communities, which were selected because of the prevalence of CSEC. The study was conducted over 14 months.

The study used methodological and ethical approaches that are child-focused and sensitive, recognising that children are 'reflexive participants' who 'are central informants of their own life worlds' (Christensen and James 2008: xx). Its methodology was designed with the understanding that it must be appropriate for the participants and their social, political and cultural contexts. It was also designed in a way that children were not mere respondents, but participants who played an active role in the interpretation and shaping of the research process. The methodology encapsulated multiple data collection techniques that are child-centred. This allowed the capturing of children's language, experiences and perspectives. It also allowed flexibility in the collection of data and the triangulation of research findings. A planning and training workshop was conducted during the first phase of the study. It was during this workshop that the researchers were trained and familiarised with all components of the research process. The semi-structured Interview Guide and the Code of Conduct were validated during the workshop.

Desktop research was conducted during the second phase. Existing data on CSEC in Zimbabwe were gathered from varied sources such as newspapers, books, research reports, government documents and journals. This was followed by field research. The research was conducted using three methods: a reconnaissance study, observations and in-depth interviews. The reconnaissance study was used to informally gather information about various aspects of CSEC in Zimbabwe. These include: what children and communities think about CSEC; where and why CSEC is prevalent; what makes children vulnerable to CSEC; the practices that are involved in CSEC; the experiences of children who are victims of CSEC; and existing interventions against CSEC.

The reconnaissance study enabled the researchers to gather information that was difficult to gather through formal interviews. It also enabled the researchers to form and build relations with children, community members and leaders, sex workers and government institutions. The reconnaissance study was followed by observational visits to bars, nightclubs, *mashabhini* (shebeens) and brothels. The objective was to gain an appreciation of the 'ecosystem' of CSEC, with a focus on where and how it takes place, the practices that are involved and societal attitudes towards CSEC. Focused observation was directed towards the victims, the perpetrators and the facilitators or collaborators of CSEC. Rich information was gathered through this method.

The observational site visits were followed by in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with victims and survivors of CSEC; sex workers; the media; parliamentarians; community members and leaders; civil society organisations working on children's rights; the police; the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare; truck drivers; and the owners, staff members and patrons of bars, night clubs, brothels and *mashabhini*. The sampling of participants was dependent on the characteristics of the context such as access and vulnerability of participants. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit child participants and sex workers because of the characteristics of this population. Criterion sampling was used to recruit community leaders and participants from civil society organisations and government institutions. Their experience and engagement with CSEC was used as the key criterion. Different methods were used to access participants, especially child participants. Child participants were accessed through referrals, key informants and civil society organisations and government departments whose work focuses on children's rights and wellbeing. Communities were accessed through community leaders.

The participants were chosen because of their capacity to provide valuable information and perspectives for the study. Children who are survivors of CSE provided experiential information about the circumstances that made them vulnerable to CSE, their experiences with CSE and how they escaped from CSE. Sex workers were chosen because of their special knowledge about CSEC and their capacity to help the researchers gain access to child participants. Community members, civil society organisations, truck drivers and the owners, staff members and patrons of bars, night clubs, brothels and *mashabhini* provided information about the factors that make children vulnerable to CSE, the places where CSEC takes place, the perpetrators of CSEC, what society thinks about CSEC and the interventions against CSEC.

The Zimbabwe Republic Police, especially the Victim Friendly Unit, has a special responsibility in the fight against CSEC. The Unit was established to police sexual crimes that are committed against women and children. Police officers provided information about what is being done by the police in the fight against CSEC, the challenges that the police encounter in this fight, the areas where CSEC is prevalent, and what makes children vulnerable to CSEC. Parliamentarians provided information about the causes of CSEC and what Parliament has done and should do to effectively fight against CSEC. The inclusion of diverse participants – 126 participants in total – enabled the study to appreciate the ecosystem of CSEC from diverse perspectives. The participants provided enough information to fully examine and understand the phenomenon of CSEC in Zimbabwe. After interviewing 126 participants, the researchers realised that the research project had reached data saturation stage. Any further collection of data would yield redundant information. Table 1 shows the categories of participants and the number of people who were interviewed per category.

Table 1: Interviews

Category of participant	Number of participants
Victims of CSEC	52
Survivors of CSEC	2
Parliamentarians	2
Police officers (Victim Friendly Unit)	10
Sex workers	12
Truck drivers	3
Community leaders	4
Community members	18
Civil society organisations	2
The media	1
The Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare	2
Owners and staff members of bars, night clubs, brothels and shebeens	18
Total number of interviews	126

Research Ethics

It is important to establish and observe research ethics, especially when conducting research with children who are victims of CSE. Researching on CSEC raises social, religious, cultural, ethical, legal, methodological and practical dilemmas. Before undertaking this research project, the researchers attended a workshop in Harare, Zimbabwe, organised by CODESRIA. During the workshop, it was emphasised that all research projects should observe research ethics and that, when conducting research which involves children, researchers should seek informed consent from the parents or guardians of the participants (Laws and Mann 2004; Twum-Danso 2004). However, this ethical requirement is difficult to apply to research projects on CSEC. This is because some of the children do not have parents or they are often located geographically far from their parents or guardians. But for those who have, seeking consent from their parents or guardians can cause many risks for them. Under such circumstances, informed consent should be sought from the children themselves. This explains why, during the planning phase of this study, the researchers sought to establish whether children who are victims of CSE can be interviewed, and whether they are capable of giving informed consent.

Scholars have debated whether children are capable of giving informed consent. King and Churchill (2000:42) argue that parental consent should be waived in circumstances where request for it might put the child at risk of harm. Rittenhouse and Felicini (2015) argue that when conducting research with children who are victims of CSE, their participation should always be based on informed consent. They further argue that although researchers can provide full information about the research, it is not possible to guarantee that children will understand it, even where clear and simple language is used. The consensus among scholars is that children can be capable of giving consent, but it is difficult to tell whether the consent is informed (King and Churchill 2000; Morris *et al.* 2012). Bourke and Loveridge (2014) argue that it is not possible to fully obtain informed consent from children because they are unlikely to comprehend the complex nature of the research; they therefore believe that children should be offered on-going opportunities to express informed consent and dissent.

Other scholars argue that the ability of children to give informed consent should be assessed on a case-by-case basis because it depends on the peculiarities of the research context and each child's experiences and expectations (Graham *et al.* 2013; King and Churchill 2000; Morrow and Richards 1996). However, whether the consent is informed or not, child

participants must be made fully aware that their participation is voluntary and that they have the right to change their mind, to withdraw from the interview and to answer questions selectively (Alderson and Morrow 2004; King and Churchill 2000; Mishna *et al.* 2004). It is important for information to be provided to children in ways that are appropriate to their age, competencies and cultural contexts (Ruiz-Casares and Thompson 2016).

The researchers established that most studies on CSEC conducted interviews with children. For example, in their review of studies on CSEC conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, Hounmenou and Her (2017) found that 52 out of 72 studies conducted interviews with child victims. In the ZNCWC's 2014 study on CSEC, children were interviewed without having sought consent from their parents or guardians. The study argues that 'acquiring parental/guardian permission is not a reasonable requirement given the characteristics of the population under study' (ZNCWC 2014:9). Perschler-Desai (2010) interviewed victims of CSEC during a research project on teenage prostitution in Southern Africa; and Hoot *et al.* (2006) interviewed 70 children during a study on CSEC in Ethiopia.

It was against this background that consent was sought from the children who participated in this study, and not from their parents or guardians. In the consent-seeking process, the children were provided with all the information about the research. They were informed that participation is voluntary, confidential and anonymous, that consent is an ongoing process and that they reserve the right to withdraw from participation at any stage of the interview process and to decide to answer certain questions and not others. They were also informed about the purpose of the research and how the information will be stored, used and disseminated. The researchers noted that the children easily understood expert terms such as 'voluntary participation', but they could not easily understand terms such as 'confidentiality' and 'anonymity'. In order to address this problem, the researchers explained these terms using more familiar and context-specific terms. A multi-stage ethical clearance approach was adopted in order to safeguard the rights, wellbeing and interests of participants. Official government clearance was sought and obtained. Clearance and informed consent were also obtained from local authorities, the police and community leaders in the areas where the interviews were conducted.

There are multiple risks associated with research on CSEC. Children who are victims of CSE may experience psychological and emotional trauma during and after interviews (Twum-Danso 2004). For this reason, a number of ethical guardrails were used to ensure that children were adequately protected from any harm that could arise as a consequence

of their participation in the study. First, all researchers who conducted interviews had prior knowledge and experience of conducting research with children. The researchers also received rigorous professional training on how to conduct research with children who are victims of CSE, including how to identify signs of discomfort and trauma and what to do should participants show these signs. These steps were stipulated in a comprehensive Code of Conduct, which was developed and validated during the planning and training workshop. Second, a child-friendly semi-structured interview guide was used throughout the interviews. However, the researchers were encouraged to be flexible because general guidelines lack the capacity to address the complexity and reflexivity of working with vulnerable populations (Pittaway *et al.* 2010:78). Third, the researchers mapped out and developed a register of governmental and non-governmental actors whose work focusses on providing support and services to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. The register was used to establish referral pathways. A psychologist was engaged to identify and handle the social, emotional and psychological issues that arose during interviews. A budget was set aside to deal with such eventualities, especially to facilitate referrals. Fourth, the lead researcher monitored and evaluated the entire research process to ensure that research ethics were strictly observed by all researchers. Fifth, where necessary and possible, the victims were accessed through government departments, civil society organisations, key informants and parliamentarians who previously engaged or assisted them. Sixth, the research questions were framed and asked in line with the principles and practices of childhood research.

Findings

This section seeks to establish why some children are more vulnerable to CSE than others. This includes establishing why, within certain groups of children in related circumstances, some children can be more vulnerable than others. It uses case studies of child participants to establish how they became victims of CSE. It also uses the views of other participants of the study.

Children who are out of School

Children who are out of school are vulnerable to CSE (Albanese 2007; Bang *et al.* 2014; Chase and Statham 2004; Estes and Weiner 2005). Children drop out of school because of circumstances such as lack of resources, the challenges of walking long distances to school, bullying, prejudice and domestic problems such as the need to take care of family members, particularly the terminally ill (Perschler-Desai 2010). In Zimbabwe, many

of the children who became victims of CSE either dropped out of school or never attended. In 2017, the government moved 73 children who were victims of CSE from Hopley and Epworth to places of safety, 71 of whom had dropped out of school due to financial hardships (Mupfumira 2017). The 2014 ZNCWC study noted that 97.3 per cent of the child participants never attended school.

In this study, 85 per cent of the children who were interviewed dropped out of primary school (see Table 2). Of these, 80 per cent did not go beyond grade 3, 20 per cent did not go beyond grade 5, and 13 per cent never attended school. Only 2 per cent were attending school, but they often missed classes and examinations because of the physical, emotional, social and psychological demands and consequences of commercial sex. Eighty-seven per cent did not have a birth registration certificate.

Table 2: Reasons for dropping out of school

Main reason	Children affected
Lack of school fees and other essentials necessary for education	45%
Pregnancy, forced/early marriages	21%
Religious/cultural beliefs that do not value formal education	18%
Bullying/abuse by teachers and other students	1%
Lack of interest in education	2%
Taking care of family members	3%
Lack of schools in the local area	2%
Lack of birth registration certificate	4%
Witchcraft	1%
Stigmatisation/prejudice	3%

Children who are out of school have different degrees of vulnerability to CSE. Children can be out of school, but safe from CSE. While being out of school is a factor that makes children vulnerable to CSE, it is when this factor interacts with other risk factors that children can become further vulnerable to CSE. This study found that out-of-school children who live in urban and peri-urban areas are more vulnerable to CSE than those who live in rural areas. Within this group, those who live in transit towns, mining towns and extremely poor high-density suburbs are more vulnerable than those who live in medium and low-density suburbs. Within this group, those who seek and engage in income generating activities, especially vending, are more vulnerable than those who have parents or guardians who take care of their needs.

Out-of-school children who live in the aforementioned areas are more vulnerable because most of these areas are characterised by the 'normalisation' of sexual harassment, sexualisation of women and girls, (gender based) violence, substance abuse, rape, (organised) crime and unregistered places of entertainment such as shebeens and bottle stores. The demand for sex with children is higher in these areas than it is in rural areas and low-density suburbs. In some of the areas where the research was conducted, the researchers witnessed some children who were strip dancing in beer halls and bottle stores. During the strip dancing, men were making sexually related comments about the children. After strip dancing, the children are often picked and sexually exploited in return for money and other forms of 'payment'.

The researchers observed that many of the members of these communities regard CSEC as 'normal', even though they believe that it is a repugnant practice. CSEC has 'become normal' to them because it happens all the time and there is no sustained appetite from governmental and non-governmental actors to eliminate the problem. This belief, which is reinforced by victim-blaming attitudes, has eroded their appetite to report perpetrators of CSEC to the police and other authorities. Some of them can even direct visitors to places where they can have sex with 'fresh women'.

It is therefore riskier for rural children who are out of school to migrate to these urban and peri-urban spaces, especially in search of income generating opportunities. Seventy-seven percent of the child victims who participated in this study migrated from rural areas where they were 'struggling but safe from CSEC'. All of them became victims of CSEC when they came to urban and peri-urban areas. It is therefore important to implement interventions that reduce the migration of children who are in difficult circumstances from rural to urban and peri-urban areas. Rural development is one way of achieving this goal.

Homeless Children

Homeless children are the most vulnerable to CSEC. Within this group, those who live on the streets are particularly vulnerable compared to those who are in children's homes or other formal institutions. For example, Tatenda remarked that 'I have gone through every terrible situation which a human being can experience under the sun. I think that even hell itself is not as bad as the situations which I have faced in my life'. Ethel stated that 'I have heard people saying that the worst thing which can happen to a child is to become a prostitute. I don't see it that way. I have gone through hell'. While

other children tend to engage in commercial sex work without necessarily having to make a 'conscious decision', the majority of homeless children make the decision to engage in commercial sex work. This is primarily because they tend to get to a point where they are convinced that they have nothing else to lose.

Victims of Child Labour

Victims of child labour are vulnerable to CSE. However, this study found that those who work as street vendors or domestic workers are more vulnerable. Within this group, those who are out of school and work without the knowledge, consent and attention of their parents or guardians are the most vulnerable because of the lack of supportive and protective social ties. The knowledge that such children do not have social ties makes their 'employers', the relatives and visitors of their 'employers' and some community members to take advantage of them, including sexually abusing them. Seventy-one per cent of the children who participated in this study worked as domestic workers or vendors. It was clear from their responses that the lack of social ties made them highly vulnerable to CSE.

For example, Vimbai worked as a domestic worker in Mabvuku, Harare. For the first two years of her work, she worked with the knowledge and consent of her mother, and was also going to school. Her mother was a single mother. Vimbai decided to work because she wanted to take care of her mother and siblings. Her mother and 'employers' agreed that 80 per cent of her salary should be directly paid to her mother while 20 per cent should be used for her school fees. During this period, Vimbai's 'employers' constantly communicated with her mother and seemingly 'everything was going on well'. However, the situation changed when her mother died because this left her without any protective and supportive social ties. Her employers suddenly changed the way they treated her. They withdrew her from school and reduced her salary on the grounds that as a child, she did not need 'a lot of money'. They physically and verbally abused her. The situation became unbearable to the point that she left the job and engaged in commercial sex work because she had nowhere to go.

Children who work as domestic workers are also vulnerable to sexual abuse by their 'employers'. Explaining how one of the child victims whom she interviewed got exposed to CSE, Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga, a member of parliament who is renowned for fighting for women's rights, stated:

So, she walks into this home and the first person who abuses her is the man of that house. She is found being abused by the man of that house and the

woman of that house kicks her out and says “*wakatobhadharwa* [you were already remunerated] because you have been sleeping with my husband” (Parliament of Zimbabwe 2017).

Children who work as street vendors are also vulnerable to CSE. Perpetrators take advantage of the children by giving or promising them money and other material things. For example, Chipo, who is based in Beit Bridge, became a victim when she started to sell samosas and fruit and vegetables to generate income for her family. Chipo’s mother was also a street vendor. However, Chipo was 12 years old her mother was disabled by a stroke and this forced Chipo to engage in street vending whenever she was not in school. The situation deteriorated to the point that Chipo was forced out of school and she became a full-time street vendor. A certain male ‘customer’ then started to behave as though he cared about Chipo’s wellbeing. He bought Chipo’s items almost every day and told her to keep the change. Chipo thought that the man was a caring customer. One day, the man invited Chipo to his house; the unsuspecting Chipo agreed. When she got there, she was given ‘a lot of gifts’, which she accepted. He promised to ‘rescue her from poverty’ if she accepted what he wanted. By this time, Chipo was already feeling indebted to the man because of what he had done for her. She also wanted to continue receiving the ‘gifts’. As a result, she accepted to sleep with him. This happened for about six months. The man eventually went to South Africa in search of job opportunities, and another man came and told her that ‘I can organise men who can sleep with you and give you money’. This is how she became a victim of CSE. Chipo was aged 14 at the time she participated in this project. Children who practice street vending, especially those who are out of school and/or are not monitored by their parents or guardians, are at greater risk of CSE.

Orphans

While orphans are generally vulnerable to CSE, those who have no relatives who are committed to take care of them are more vulnerable. This is because they are at the risk of being moved from one family to the other. Their access to education gets constantly disrupted as they move between schools, they get exposed to ‘convoluted socialisation’ and to different forms of abuse, making it somewhat inevitable for them to believe that no one loves them. Rutendo narrated the excruciating circumstances that ‘bludgeoned’ her following the death of her parents in a tragic accident in 2015, when she was 9 years old. Her paternal relatives scrambled for the material resources that were left by her parents. She recounted that:

They took away everything and left me with nothing, except the clothes I was wearing. No family wanted to live with me. I was kicked towards all directions like a ball. I would live with a particular family during the morning, spend my evening with a different family and sleep under the roof of another family. I would live with 3 to 4 families within 24 hours.

No family or individual was committed to sending her to school. Instead, she became a domestic worker for the families she lived with. She eventually ran away, lived on the streets and engaged in commercial sex work.

Children who live with Stepmothers

Children who live with their stepmothers are more vulnerable to CSE than those who live with their stepfathers. While stepfathers can be abusive, children who live with their stepfather get love, support and protection from their mother. This reduces their vulnerability to abuse, including sexual exploitation. In this study, the children who lived with their stepmothers told heart-wrenching stories of abuse and neglect. They did not experience love, affection, empathy or a sense of belonging at either the family or community level. As a result, they fled negative and abusive home and community environments in search of love, support and acceptance elsewhere. They found themselves living and working on the streets, living in abandoned buildings or shacks, living with strangers, placed in foster care, or working as domestic or farm workers. Despite all the challenges associated with CSEC, some of the children stated that there are times when they get the love, empathy and acceptance that they failed to get when they were still living with their families and relatives. However, the 'love, empathy and acceptance' is feigned and intended to make the children emotionally and materially dependent on the abusers.

Children who Take care of their Parents and Siblings

This study found that there are children who decide to engage in commercial sex work to take responsibility for their parents and siblings. Children who are orphans and whose parents are terminally ill or disabled (especially the eldest ones in the family) tend to be more vulnerable to this responsibility. While speaking about CSEC in Zimbabwe during a motion in the National Assembly, Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga stated that when she asked child victims why they got into commercial sex work, one of them stated that 'I have a little sister of mine who is two or three years and we live in a shack. If I do not go and get the 25 cents, and put it together so that I can buy bread tomorrow, she may actually die of hunger'

(Parliament of Zimbabwe 2017). Similarly, a victim who was interviewed by *The Chronicle* stated that:

I was 10 years old when my mother died in 2012 and my father followed two years later. As the eldest child, I was left with the sole responsibility of taking care of my siblings. My friend who was already into sex work invited me to Ngundu and she introduced me to a Malawian truck driver who became my regular client...I am now a full-time sex worker who has to fend for my 2-year-old son and two young brothers aged 13 and 11 (Netsianda 2017).

The finding that some children engage in sex work not for their own sake but for that of their parents and siblings is noteworthy and important. This is because it debunks the mainstream narrative by society that children who engage in commercial sex work are irresponsible, aberrant and repugnant. If society understands how some of the victims of CSE sacrifice themselves for the sake of others, attitudes may change. In the case of some children, the situation was so desperate that their parents implicitly or explicitly asked them to go into commercial sex work to generate income for the family. For example, Tariro said that ‘my mother knows that I am into sex work. She is a dedicated Christian. I never thought that she would accept dirty money. But she accepts the money because that is the only way she can live. My money is dirty, but at least it is giving life to someone’.

Children of Sex Workers

Children whose mothers are sex workers are particularly vulnerable to CSE. However, within this group, those who live with or regularly visit their mothers are the most vulnerable. Twelve per cent of the children who participated in this study are children of sex workers, which is indicative of this category’s vulnerability to CSE. Children who live with their mothers are more vulnerable because of many factors. The main factor is that they are constantly exposed, in many ways, to the language, practices and even struggles of sex work. For example, because in most cases sex workers conduct their activities from their homes and the majority live in a single room, it is common for mothers to have sex in the presence of their children.

These children also get exposed to CSE because their mothers often use them to conduct transitions with their clients. This includes collecting money or passing messages to the clients. In some cases, it includes preparing food and bathing water for the clients. For example, Joylin fetched her mother’s clients, brought them home and cooked for them. Because of these practices, children casually relate with the clients of their mothers and get immersed in the ‘cultures’ of sex work. This creates an environment

that makes it easy for them to be sexually exploited without the knowledge of their mothers. In April 2018, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Health, the Portfolio Committee on Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs and the Women Affairs Portfolio Committee visited Chiredzi on a fact-finding mission on CSEC. Speaking during the meeting, a sex worker who entered into sex work at the age of 12 years stated that:

Some of us saw our mothers making easy money by selling their bodies, so we thought that the business was lucrative. I heard that other children were kicked out by their mothers who were into prostitution because they had grown up, and the mothers felt they were disturbing their boyfriends (Mafirakureva 2019).

The Case Study below Shows how Children of Sex Workers Become Vulnerable to CSE

Prudence

Prudence was 14 years old at the time that she participated in this study. She was born in one of the rural areas in Masvingo. Her mother is a well-known sex worker in Beit Bridge. Initially, Prudence lived with her grandparents in the rural area. During this time, she was safe from CSE. However, when her grandparents died, she was forced to relocate and live with her mother in Beit Bridge. Prudence and her mother lived in a very small room. Most of her mother's clients are long distance truck drivers. The mother conducted sexual transactions in the presence of Prudence. Prudence recounted how she saw and heard her mother and her clients 'doing their things'. In some cases, the mother fought and argued with her clients over misunderstandings related to payment. Disgruntled by her mother's engagement in sex work, Prudence confronted her mother a number of times, asking her to quit sex work.

The mother's response was blunt. She told Prudence that 'You came out through my vagina and the money with which I am taking care of you is coming through my vagina. If I stop sex work, you will die of hunger'. Prudence was going to school but she eventually lost interest because of her experiences at home and because other children jeered due to her mother's involvement in sex work. Prudence knew many of her mother's clients. Some of the regular clients brought her 'gifts', many times without the knowledge of her mother.

One day, one of the clients who usually brought her some 'gifts' came looking for her mother, who was not at home. She had travelled to her rural home where she was not reachable by telephone. Prudence told him that

her mother was not around. He responded ‘your mother is not around, but this should not be a problem because you are here. You are now ripe; I will give you US\$20’. Prudence did not know how to respond. As she was still gathering her thoughts, the man handed her a US\$20 note, which she instinctively accepted. He started to make sexual advances. He slept with her. That is how she became a victim. Her mother began to accuse her of ‘interfering with her business’ and asked her to leave and take responsibility of herself. Prudence left her mother’s place and engaged in full-time commercial sex work. During the time that she participated in this study, she was living with her friend.

Children who have ‘no-one who understands them’

Children who do not have anyone, or who believe that there is no-one to care or empathise with them, especially when they are going through overwhelming circumstances, are more vulnerable to CSE. Children who come from poor and dysfunctional families but are able to get empathy from other sections of society are less vulnerable to CSE. It is therefore particularly important that if a child cannot get empathy from family and/or relatives, they get it from other sections of society such as teachers and community leaders and members. Children need to have someone who hears their ‘silent’ voice. This plays a very important role in protecting them from CSE, even if it may not change their material circumstances. It is very important for different sections of society, especially teachers and community leaders, to speak to children and try to understand their social and economic situations. This is especially important if they notice unusual behaviour or signs of stress. The case study below demonstrates the importance of social empathy towards children, particularly for those who are in difficult situations.

Anna

Anna lived with her aunt in Mabvuku. She was enrolled in grade 4 at a local school. However, her aunt got to a point where she was unable to meet the costs of Anna’s education. Anna could not entertain the thought of dropping out of school. She had the dream of becoming a medical doctor and she knew that education was the only way that would enable her to achieve that dream. She thought of ways of raising money for her education. She worked for a neighbour as a part-time domestic worker. Before she went to school, Anna would go to the neighbour’s house and work. She would do the same when she came back from school. At home, Anna’s aunt

expected her to perform all the chores and use part of her money to pay bills and buy groceries. At school, Anna often missed classes because she was overwhelmed with work. She also missed some of the examinations because of her circumstances. Her teachers and classmates thought of her as a lazy and irresponsible child. They also ostracised and ridiculed her. Her teacher scolded her, saying that she was 'the oldest and laziest child in the class'. Anna did not tell her teachers and classmates what she was going through at home. She also did not tell her aunt what she was going through at school. She believed, from the way she was perceived and treated, that no-one understood her. It was at this point that she came across a man who 'showed that he cared for me'. The man asked her about what she was going through. He gave her the money to meet her costs of education. The man eventually asked her to 'give back the favour'. This is how she ended up being sexually exploited in return for money and other things. She eventually ran away from home and engaged in sex work.

Victims of Child Marriages

Seventeen per cent of the children who participated in this study are survivors of child marriages, who got married when they were aged between 11 and 14 years. The circumstances that caused them to get married varied, including the need by their parents to raise resources through bride price, religious reasons and the need to evade appalling circumstances at home. One of them was married to 'appease the avenging spirit' of a man who was killed by her brother. These children left their marriages for reasons that include (alleged) infidelity, gender based violence, abuse, and interference by family and community members.

Among those children who left their marriages, some are more vulnerable to CSE than others. Those who cannot go back to their parents or guardians are particularly vulnerable, especially if they have children from the marriage. What makes them more vulnerable is the need to raise resources to take care of themselves, and especially their children. For example, Dadai stated that:

When I walked out of the marriage, I had a child and I was also pregnant. I could not go back to my family because they were against my decision to quit the marriage. I came to Harare where I tried to look for a job but I failed to get one. It was also difficult for me to work because of the pregnancy. It was at this point that I decided to join this [sex work] industry.

Conclusion

It is true that poverty is a major factor that makes children vulnerable to CSE. However, this singular, dominant and generalised narrative is deficient because it misses the intricacies and nuances of CSEC. It is true that children who are victims of CSE are predominantly from economically insecure backgrounds. However, children can be poor but safe from CSE. Why is it that poverty causes the commercial sexual exploitation of some poor children but not others? The deconstruction of the poverty narrative helps us to understand that some poor children are more vulnerable to CSE than others because of the peculiar ways in which risk factors accumulate, within and beyond poverty. Giving a poignant account of the circumstances that make some children more vulnerable to CSE than others, Tinotenda stated that:

Imagine that you are a child, you have lost both parents, you dropped out of school because no one could pay your school fees, you have no food to eat or clothes to wear, you have no one to take care of you, you do not even have any social or spiritual support to strengthen and encourage you, you have been rejected by the extended family and the society such that you can as well reject yourself, you have no house to stay, and you cannot get employed because you are a child and you are not educated. To be realistic and honest, under these circumstances, sex work is not a choice, but the only option which is available to you. You either have to take it and survive or leave it and die.

This account shows, in line with the findings of the study, that children become more vulnerable to CSE when poverty is enmeshed with other individual, family, social and societal circumstances. It is therefore important to understand how the ecosystem of CSEC works. This enables stakeholders such as the government, the regional and international community and civil society to understand the interventions that are helpful and where they are needed the most.

This study has established the cohorts of children that are the most vulnerable to CSE. In terms of children who are out of school, those who are based in urban and peri-urban areas (especially in transit towns, mining towns and extremely poor high-density suburbs) are more vulnerable than those who are based in rural areas. Those who migrate from rural to urban areas become more vulnerable than those who remain in rural areas. In terms of victims of child labour, those who work as street vendors or domestic workers are more vulnerable. Those who work in rural contexts are less vulnerable than those who work in poor and crowded urban and peri-urban contexts. Among those who work as domestic workers, those who work

without the knowledge, consent and support of their parents or guardians are more vulnerable because of the lack of supportive and protective social networks. In terms of victims of child marriages who would have walked out of their marriages, those who are not willing or able to go back and live with their families or guardians are more vulnerable. This is especially if they have one or more children from the marriage. In terms of children of sex workers, those who live with their mothers are more vulnerable than those who live with their paternal or maternal relatives, especially in rural areas. Those who visit their mothers, especially regularly, are also more vulnerable. This is because these children get exposed to the language, practices and struggles of sex work. Homeless children are the most vulnerable. This is because they live in the most excruciating of circumstances. This forces them to seek material things by every means possible, including sex work. Most of the homeless children are orphans or come from families that are dysfunctional. Children who live with their stepmothers are more vulnerable than those who live with their stepfathers. This is because the former are often abused by their stepmothers, while the latter get support, love and protection from their mothers.

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