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Yes! Kissing Too... The Child Would Not Be Hurt in Any Way: Social Constructions of Child Sexual Abuse in the Ga Community in Ghana

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.15.3.06>

Abstract The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child obligates nations to protect children from all forms of abuse including sexual. However, child sexual abuse is a complex phenomenon which is difficult to understand as a result of cultural reasons. In view of this, the programs, policies, and interventions put in place to curb the phenomenon of child sexual abuse globally can only be effective if they are relevant to the social and cultural setting within which it happens. This is an exploratory study that sought to investigate social constructions of child sexual abuse in the Ga community. The study uses qualitative research methods to collect data from 42 respondents via six focus group discussions across three selected towns in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The findings showed that sexual activities between adults and children that were regarded as acceptable did not constitute child sexual abuse. However, sexual behaviors between adults and children that were regarded as unacceptable were viewed as serious, hence, considered as sexual abuse. The findings of this study illustrate the need for appropriate cultural interventions in curbing the phenomenon of child sexual abuse in the Ga Community in Ghana.

Keywords Child Sexual Abuse; Acceptable Sexual Behaviors; Non-Acceptable Sexual Behaviors; Transactional Sex

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Introduction/Research Problem

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a human rights issue which affects millions of children globally. In view of this, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC,¹ puts an obligation on almost all states to protect children from all forms of maltreat-

¹ See: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>. Retrieved July 03, 2019.

ment perpetrated by adults, including sexual abuse. Although there are laws in most states to protect children from sexual abuse, the reality on the ground is different. Today, significant figures of CSA cases continue to be reported by various professionals worldwide, including the police. The World Health Organization, for instance, reports that about 223 million children have experienced a form of sexual violence in their lives (United Nations Report 2006). Similarly, in Ghana, the Domestic Violence and Victim's Support Unit (DOVVSU) in their annual report estimated that about 1,304 children were defiled in 2014. Despite the alarming rates of CSA in many parts of the world, the official reports represent just a small percentage of the reality on the ground (Finkelhor 1994). This is mainly as a result of cultural reasons which bring variation in its definition (Saewyc, Pettingell, and Magee 2003).

The social constructionist argues against the idea that only one reality of CSA exists in the world and supports the view that alternative realities exist (Yerby 1995). As a result, there have been disagreements among researchers and practitioners regarding behaviors that constitute CSA (Russel 1983). This is because societal norms make it difficult for behaviors that constitute CSA to be clearly defined (Back and Lips 1998; Jones and Jemmott 2010). This view substantiates the thought that the reality of CSA as defined by the UNCRC, which is the basis for most laws protecting children from sexual abuse in modern times, may not reflect the reality of CSA in most societies. This is because people's experiences, realities, and perspectives of CSA are based on their socio-cultural circumstances, and these become their reality. In some cultures, there are behaviors that are

considered as sexual abuse, but are approved norms in other social settings. Thus, variation in people's attitudes and reactions regarding CSA is dependent on cultural guidelines which distinguish between suitable and unsuitable behaviors (Guma and Henda 2004). Irrespective of the variations in the attitudes and reactions of people regarding CSA in different cultures, sexual abuse affects the development of children in every society.

Due to the serious effects of CSA on its victims, it has been classified as a public health issue (Madu, Ndom, and Ramashia 2010). Research shows that children who are sexually abused go through serious mental, physical, psychological, and social effects (Roberts et al. 2009; Green et al. 2010). These effects can be reduced based on the social support children receive from their communities. However, cultural beliefs and practices can make children feel shameful and guilty about their experiences, which make disclosure difficult (Azad and Leander 2015). The removal of cultural barriers on CSA disclosure will make it possible for victims to openly talk about their experiences (Ronai 1995). According to Ronai (1995), the lack of openness about the subject of CSA amount to a denial of its existence and taking appropriate measures to address the situation. This empowers offenders to continue their cycle of abuse, since they will not be punished for their actions. In societies such as the Ga community in Ghana, cultural beliefs and practices regarding CSA victimize victims of CSA instead of providing them with the necessary support.

Ghana prides itself on being the first nation to ratify the UNCRC in 1990. It has also endorsed other international conventions like the African Charter on

Human and People's Rights and the Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child and enacted several laws and policies that are to protect children from abuse. These include the amendment of the Criminal Code Act 1998 (Act 554), the Children's Act 1998 (Act 560), and the Domestic Violence Act 2007 (Act 732). Irrespective of these laws and policies to protect children from abuse, emerging evidence shows that the magnitude and frequency of CSA have not changed much in Ghana (Boakye 2009; DOVVSU 2014). This is as a result of cultural reasons which present the phenomenon of CSA from different lenses. The social constructionist theory posits that norms that construct CSA vary across cultures. In societies where violence against children is socially accepted and not perceived as abusive, children are made to suffer in silence instead of receiving support for their traumatic experience (Tetteh and Markwei 2018). Instead, they are regarded as deviants and blamed for their sexual abuse. Thus, making them vulnerable and feeling helpless about their situation (Tetteh and Markwei 2018). Hence, this study sought to identify socially acceptable behaviors that normalize the phenomenon of CSA in the Ga community. The intent of this study is to interrogate the extent to which the social construction of sexual abuse endangers children to CSA and propose measures in addressing the situation that defines CSA in the Ga community in Ghana.

Methodology

Research Design and Study Area

The study employed a qualitative research design. This approach was necessary because it allowed the

researcher to present a complex and holistic view of the world of the participants studied (Creswell 1998). The design also provided an opportunity that captured the subjective views of the participants' perceptions and unique experiences of sexual abuse (Neuman 2011). The data for this study is part of a broader study which looks at the socio-cultural perspective of CSA in the Ga community in Ghana. Focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and case studies were used to solicit information for the socio-cultural context of CSA in the Ga community. However, for the purpose of this article, qualitative data from the focus group discussions which describe the social constructs of CSA in the Ga community are presented.

The study was conducted in the Ga community which lies in the southern part of Ghana, not more than 10 kilometers from the coast of the Akwapim hills. The Ga community is situated within the Greater Accra Region of Ghana and is also its capital. The population of the Ga as of 2001 was about 587,412 persons, with the greater number of them living in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana (GSS 2000). The Ga community has a decentralized traditional political administration centered on the six major settlements of Ga Mashi, La, Osu, Teshie, Nungua, and Tema (Brukum, Pwamang, and Tonah 2009). Due to globalization and migration, many parts of the Ga traditional area have become ethnically heterogeneous (Wellington 2002). These changes have, however, brought few improvements in the lives of many ordinary Ga residents, "with many Ga settlements suffering from increased poverty, overcrowding, and a generally poor infrastructure" (Brukum, Pwamang, and Tonah 2009:165).

Statistics from the DOVVSU (2014) show that the Greater Accra Region alone recorded 1,466 cases of CSA in the first nine months of 2014. This figure was described by many child rights advocates and the media as alarming. Again, the region recorded 553 reported cases of CSA, the highest among all the ten regions of Ghana in 2005 (DOVVSU 2006). Although these figures are relevant in the selection of the region for the study, it may not represent the exact situation on the ground, since most cases of CSA are usually not reported.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants

The ages of the participants in the focus group discussions ranged from 20 to 70 years. Out of the 42 participants who took part in the study, 12 of them were between the ages of 20-40, 15 were between 41-51, 10 between 52-62, while five were between the ages of 63-73. The age distribution of the participants is a reflection of persons in their early adulthood, mid adulthood, and late adulthood and this represents different generations. In terms of education, 15 had primary, five secondary, and six tertiary educations, while 16 had not attended school. With regards to marital status, 15 of the respondents were married, five widowed, 12 single, and 10 divorced or separated. Also, the data showed that nearly all the participants had children. Further, all the participants stated that they were Christians, with a few stating that they did not belong to any religion and others said they were traditionalist, thus practicing African Traditional Religion. It was also realized that the majority of the participants engaged in low earning

occupations such as petty trading, fishing, fish mongering, and petty artistic jobs. However, some of the participants were unemployed.

Participants Selection and Sampling Technique

Three Ga towns (James Town, La, and Teshie Maami) were purposively selected for the study because these towns are occupied by large numbers of Ga indigenes. Individual research participants were also selected through the convenience sampling technique. This allowed participants to be selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. The inclusion criteria included the participants being an indigene of the selected community and should come from similar socio-economic backgrounds. There was no gender discrimination for inclusion, both male and female community members qualified to participate in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data for the study. This method enabled the author to capture broader views about the subject being studied in an open and non-controlling manner (Green 2007). Semi-structured interview guide was used to interview the participants. The author consulted the local community members to assist in contacting the research participants (Boira, Tomas-Aragones, and Rivera 2017). The composition of the group was segmented by the respondents' sex; hence, two separate group discussions were held for males and females. At La, each of the groups had the same number of participants,

eight, while at James Town and Teshie more females participated as compared to males. At James Town, seven females participated in their group, while the males' group was made up of six participants. At Teshie, the females' group comprised of seven people, while the males' group was made up of six participants. Therefore, a total of six focus group discussions were held in the three selected communities with a total of 42 participants. Participants were also selected based on their socio-economic backgrounds to enable easy communication and interaction in the groups. Irrespective of the participants' similarities in terms of their educational background, occupation, marital status, among others, some were opinion leaders in their communities through their positions as leaders of women, men, and youth groups. The respondents sampled enabled the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the social constructs of CSA in the Ga community.

The researcher facilitated all the discussions with the help of a Research Assistant who recorded and took notes while the discussions were going on. Before the discussions, the facilitator and Research Assistant introduced themselves to the groups and spelt out rules for the discussions. Participants were humbly asked not to interrupt when someone was making a contribution or responding to a question, and were also to show respect for each other. They were assured that there was no right or wrong answer to any of the issues discussed and persons could feel free to express their thoughts. These rules made all the discussions very interactive and insightful. Each focus group discussion lasted between 45 minutes and an hour.

Ethics

The researcher carefully considered all the ethical issues involved in dealing with a sensitive topic like CSA. Ethical approval was sought from the Noguchi Ethical Clearance Board of the University of Ghana. Verbal and written consent was sought before proceeding with the study. Anonymity of participants was also ensured by disguising their names through the use of pseudonyms.

Analysis

All the interviews were translated and transcribed into English. Thematic analysis was used to organize and categorize the data according to patterns and structures that connect the themes (Polit and Hunger 1997). The purpose of this was to have a full and clearer picture of the subject. This enabled the researcher to search for patterns in data which included recurrent behaviors, beliefs, and practices (Neuman 2011). The six steps involved in thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. At the first phase, the researcher familiarized herself with the data. At the second phase, initial codes were generated. The third phase involved the collation of the codes into potential themes and the gathering of data relevant to each theme. At the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed. At the fifth stage, the themes were defined and named. The sixth phase involved the production of the research report. The researcher crosschecked the interviews with the participants at a later day to ensure consistency and truthfulness in data. Furthermore, the researcher constantly crosschecked the transcribed data with the audio recordings to ensure validity of data.

Results

Using thematic analysis, three main themes emerged in the focus group discussions. Acceptable sexual activities, non-acceptable sexual activities, and beliefs about victims of CSA contextualize participants' construction of CSA. This distinction demonstrates the forms of CSA that were treated seriously and those disregarded by community members.

Acceptable Sexual Activities

In the FGDs, participants were asked about their views on what constituted CSA in their community. A differentiation was made between acceptable and non-acceptable sexual activities between adults and children. The sub-themes that emerged under this theme are consensual sexual activities, non-penetrative sexual activities, and transactional sexual activities with children.

Consensual Sexual Activities

The majority of the participants stated that sexual activities that children consented to could not be regarded as abuse. Such activities according to some of the participants did not receive negative reactions from community members. Some of the research participants believed adults who engaged in such activities with children could not be faulted, since the children consented to the act. For example, it resonates in the following responses:

It is normal for girls to allow their lovers to have sex with them. This mostly happens when the child's family is poor. Such lovers provide for the child's fam-

ily and ensure that the child's needs are met. Have we all not had younger lovers before? Yes, such relationships are normal because the man does not force the child. They both agree to have sex and there is nothing wrong with that. [Male participant, FGD, Teshie]

When a grown man has a *Joley* [lover] who is a child and he decides to have sex with her and she does not prevent him from doing so, it is accepted in this community. Nobody will blame the man for forcing to have sex with a child when she permits. Even if the girl gets pregnant and the man decides to marry the child, there is nothing wrong with it. This is because the child will be protected from stigma. If a child gets pregnant and the man decides not to marry her, it is a disgrace to the child's family. [Male participant, FGD, La]

The truth is that having sex with our beautiful girls is very common in this community. There is no man in this town who is not guilty of this. Once in a while, you want the young ones. If the child also wants it, that is good because you will not be blamed for having sex with a child. Nobody will say it is abuse because you did not force the child to have sex with you. It is a normal practice for one to be able to have fun with a lover. There is nothing wrong with it at all. [Male participant, FGD, Teshie]

According to the participants, having a *Joley* (lover) was an acceptable norm in the Ga community and, as a result, adults who were in intimate sexual relationships with children were not faulted. *Joley* is a Ga term for an intimate partner; two people who engage in an intimate relationship refer to each other as the *Joley*. It was not out of place for children as

young as 11 years old to have a *Joley*. The main motive behind having a *Joley* is sexual pleasure, with financial gain as a secondary objective. Parents and other persons in the community who get to know about such relationships do not frown upon them, perhaps due to the benefits derived from such an association. This is because the respondents believed such relationships were consensual ones, which benefited both parties. In this form of relationship, just like any other intimate sexual engagement, children could give consent to their partners for any sexual activity they deemed necessary. Most respondents regarded this as a form of pleasure rather than as abuse. This means in situations where children are lured by adults to consent to sexual activities with them, the offenders are not found guilty of the offence. Children who fall prey to this form of sexual activity are likely to keep their experiences to themselves for fear of society's backlash.

Non-Penetrative Sexual Activities

Some of the research participants disclosed that when adults fondled children by touching or sucking their breasts, kissing, or touching them in other sexual manners that did not involve sexual intercourse were not regarded as serious sexual offences. Almost all the participants who held this perception agreed that although sexual activities are not proper, they are pardonable because they do not harm the child in any way. In the words of this participant:

It is normal for a man to touch a child's breasts or buttocks, this is not so good, but it is normal. Yes, kissing too. The child would not be hurt in any way so it is not so bad. It is part of the growing process of

a child. You can playfully touch the child's breasts and run away...it is normal. These are games we play in the neighborhood and there is nothing wrong with it. Ask every adult in this community and find out if they never played such games when they were growing up. It is to initiate a child into adulthood. [Female Participant, FGD, La]

Another participant stated that:

There is no man in this town that does not do some of these things [smiles]. Once in a while, you want the young ones to play with. Touching their breasts or buttocks is nothing serious. It is a good feeling to the adult and interesting for the child too, I suppose. This can never be abuse because the child's womb will not be destroyed, it is harmless. [Male participant, FGD, Teshie]

A number of participants believed non-penetrative sexual activities with children did not qualify as abuse, since they did not pose any threat or harm to the child. This was best described as "playing with the child" instead of abuse. For example, according to this participant:

Oh...we all play with the girls sometimes. We hold their breasts and sometimes hit their buttocks. When they are young, they look very fresh and you are forced to touch them to know how it feels. There is nothing wrong with that. We all play with them and nobody would say you have raped the child because you are just having fun. [Male participant, FGD, Teshie]

The unwillingness of community members to see these behaviors as CSA can make its disclosure

very difficult for children. This is because no action would be taken against the perpetrators. Perpetrators would therefore see it as normal to engage in non-penetrative sexual activities with children such as touching and sucking their breasts, touching their buttocks, among others. These sexual behaviors have serious implications on the development of the child, just as it is with penetrative sexual activities. However, a number of the participants in this study stated that most adults in the community engage in non-penetrative sexual activities as a form of fun and not to harm the child. This behavior makes it difficult for children who are sexually abused through this means to be able to report their abuse and seek assistance.

Transactional Sexual Activities

Transactional sex in most communities, including that of the Ga, usually takes the form of “sugar daddy” relationships where the men are older than the girls and economically stable enough to be able to provide for them (Luke and Kurz 2002). Although girls are usually the victims of such relationships, boys also get involved in them. The findings of the study showed that it was a common practice for children to engage in sexual relationships with adults in order for their needs to be met. This is seen as normal by some participants in this study who believe most families find it impossible to meet the needs of their children. The majority of respondents stated that both the child and the adult who got involved in such a relationship benefited from it. The child mostly derived monetary benefit from the relationship, while the man obtained sexual pleasure. Adults who engaged in transactional sex with chil-

dren were not seen as abusers. For instance, these participants stated that:

Most children in this community engage in sex with older men as a source of survival. Young girls sometimes seduce men to have sex with them in exchange for money. It is a life style in this community because most people are poor. Parents sometimes force their children to engage in such activities. How can you blame a man who provides money for a needy child in exchange for sex? It is a business and the children understand what they are doing. [Male Participant, FGD, James Town]

Children who got involved in this kind of activity were perceived as persons who understood the consequences of their actions. For instance, a participant stated that:

When I was 17 years old, I had a girlfriend who was 12 years; I was having sex with her. Her family members saw it as normal and did not have any problem with it because I was taking good care of her. I was working by then. I used to give her money and pay her school fees. Her parents were very poor so they could not take care of the girl. [Male participant, FGD, La]

Some of the participants stated that, irrespective of the age of a child, it was not frowned on for children to engage in transactional sex with adults in the Ga community. This is because these activities are said to benefit both the child and the adult. The child gets monetary benefits, while the adult’s sexual needs are met. These children are usually manipulated by adults, including their parents to exchange their bodies for survival needs, and can

be considered as victims instead of persons who understand the implications of their actions.

Non-Acceptable Sexual Activities

From the perspective of the participants, what they consider as CSA are non-acceptable sexual activities with children. This is described under three sub-themes: sexual activities between adults and children which resulted in physical injuries, sexual activities between persons of the same sex and children with a wide age gap.

Physical Injuries

Some of the research participants in this study noted that an important element that was considered in regarding a sexual activity with a child as abuse was an obvious physical injury inflicted on a child after abuse. One participant, for instance, explains that:

When you go to the hospital and you are told *aplagbeken* [the child is injured], you have no choice than to punish the perpetrator. When the child's health is affected, there is nothing you can do but to report to the police. It is about the child's life so the one who did that would have to be punished because it is abuse. The child's life is destroyed and the effect will be with her forever. This is abuse and the perpetrator will have to be punished. [Female participant, FGD, La]

Similarly, in the words of another participant,

When the child's womb is destroyed, you have to do something...you have to let the person know that he is wicked and a fool. The person would have to be

jailed for life! Sometimes they even infect the child with HIV; the shock alone would let you do something serious to the person who did that to the child because the child has been abused. [Male participant, FGD, La]

It was mentioned that any sexual abuse where the child's health was seriously affected attracted sanctions from the community or was reported to the police. For instance, a situation where medical reports indicated that a child's womb was destroyed or that such a victim sustained serious physical injuries or was infected with HIV caused an outcry among community members. In such situations, every effort was made for the perpetrator to be punished. It was also realized that such persons usually fled the community for fear of being beaten or hurt by an angry mob before being sanctioned.

Same Sex Sexual Relations

A sexual relationship between two females was referred to as *supi*, while that between males was known as *kojobesia* in the Ga setting. Adults who engaged in such relationships with children were harshly treated and punished severely in the community. Some participants in the focus group discussions assert that:

Oh, it is not good for a woman to have a girl child as her *supi* [lesbian]. Yes, *supi* and *kojobesia* are very bad and it is not normal in this community. *Supi* and *kojobesia* are a curse. We need to really pray for this community. It would destroy us if we do not stop it. Adults who engage in sexual activities with children of same sex can be arrested and punished because it

is seen as sexual abuse in this community. The child will grow up engaging in such evil acts. [Female participant, FGD, James Town]

When men engage in sexual activities with boys, it is a curse. People get surprised why older men do that to the little boys in this community. They are training them to become *kojobesia*. Men and boys having sex is abnormal, just like women and girls. In this town, when you are caught, the youth can beat you and even drive you out of this community because you are seen as evil. [Female participant, FGD, Teshie]

It is *supi* which is bad. The old women who have girls as *supis* should stop. This is not good at all. It is a spirit. Why? Something should be done about it. I just do not understand it. It is not normal...hmmm. [Male participant, FGD, La]

My daughter, it is the *supi* oh...the spirit of *supi* has come to live with us here in La. The elderly women are going in for small girls to do their evil things for them. *Supi* is the vilest activity in this community. The women who have money are destroying our children...this is evil. When this happens, everybody will say it is child abuse. [Female participant, FGD, La]

Some of the participants stated that adults who engaged in sexual relations with children of the same sex brought a curse on themselves, the child, and the community as a whole. They mentioned that adults who are found culpable of such offences receive instant justice through mob action as they are beaten and forced to leave the community. Others believed offenders sometimes receive natural justice through the ancestors as they are struck dead on

some occasions. Spiritual meanings were often read into such behavior as participants believed it was not normal. It was also noted that adult offenders, as well as children who were involved in such acts were made to go through purification rites in order to cleanse themselves of the curse.

Wide Age Gap

Sexual relations between adults and children where the age difference was relatively wide were also regarded as sexual abuse according to some participants in this study. The norm in most cultures in Ghana, where men are permitted to marry younger women, makes it acceptable for sexual relations to take place between older men and younger children. The Ga communities do not frown upon such sexual relations, especially with the consent of the child. Based on the findings of the study, it is regarded as abuse only when the age gap between the two is relatively wide. A number of research participants stated that they find it very difficult to come to terms with adults who had sexual intercourse with infants or children as young as five years old. According to these participants:

When the age gap is too wide it is crazy. The man can kill the child in the act. How can a 70-year-old man have sex with a 4-year-old girl? It is wickedness. You do not need anyone to inform you that this is abuse. Adults who do that have a big problem and they need to be cured. [Male participant, FGD, Teshie]

Ah...no adult in his right senses would have sex with a baby or a toddler. If somebody does that to my child, I would kill the person because he does

not deserve to live. Even if it is not my child and it happens to someone else, the whole community will discipline the person. We call this child abuse and it is a serious issue in this community. [Female Participant, FGD, La]

Some held the view that such adults were not fit to live in their communities as their behavior amounted to killing or destroying the lives of the children. This was regarded as a serious form of CSA which the Ga society frowns upon. Acceptable and non-acceptable sexual behaviors in the Ga community, according to the participants, form the basis of the social construction of CSA in the communities studied.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to explore the social constructions of CSA in the Ga community in Ghana and to interrogate how this perpetuates the incidence of CSA. A number of themes emerged from the focus group discussions highlighting the constructions of CSA in the Ga community. The results have shown that the constructions of CSA in the communities studied are embedded in two main themes: acceptable and non-acceptable sexual behaviors. These themes demonstrate how sexually abused children are victimized in the community studied.

Acceptable Sexual Behaviors

Although some argue that all forms of CSA are for the sexual gratification of older persons and affect the development of children (Johnson 2004), this

view is not accepted in all situations in the Ga community according to the findings of this study. Acceptable sexual behaviors are sexual activities between adults and children that individuals in the Ga community did not regard as serious; hence, were viewed as normal and not considered as CSA. These behaviors include consensual sexual relations between adults and the children, non-penetrative sexual activities, and transactional sexual activities with children.

Consensual sexual activities between adults and children in the communities studied did not receive negative reactions from community members because they were regarded as normal. The World Health Organization regards CSA as any sexual activity between adults and children in which the child is not developed enough to give informed consent (WHO 1999; 2004). This is also captured in the laws of Ghana which state that a child below 16 years is not qualified to give consent for any sexual activity with an adult (The Criminal Code Amendment Act [554] 1998). This suggests that any consent given by children who are below 16 years of age for sexual activities is regarded as illegal in the laws of Ghana. Yet, in the Ga community, this is not the case for most people. Thus, an emerging issue in this regard is the clash between modern law and culture. The statutory laws which aim at protecting children from their sexual abuse are not put into practice by most people in the Ga community. Although the laws of Ghana criminalize children giving consent for sexual activities, this did not reflect in the behaviors of people in the communities studied. This is illustrated in their attitude towards the concept of *Joley*.

Respondents stated that the concept of *Joley* (having a lover) was an acceptable norm in the Ga community and, as a result, adults who were in intimate sexual relationships with children were not faulted. This is because the respondents believed such relationships were consensual ones which benefited both parties. In this form of relationship, just like any other intimate sexual engagement, children could give consent to their partners for any sexual activity they deemed necessary. Most respondents regarded this as a form of pleasure rather than as abuse.

Participants also disclosed that non-penetrative sexual activities such as fondling, touching, or sucking older children's breasts, kissing or touching them in other sexual manners that did not involve sexual intercourse were not considered serious offences in the communities studied. Most participants agreed that although these behaviors are not proper, they are regarded as normal because they do not harm the child in any way. These forms of contact are often regarded as an expression of power relations in which the body is used as a sexual object (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2009). Nevertheless, these non-penetrative sexual acts are viewed among the Ga as not serious enough to receive any negative reaction from community members.

Transactional sex was also regarded as an acceptable sexual activity in most of the communities studied. The Ga community as seen from the study is made up of persons of low socio-economic background. Parents and guardians mostly engage in low earning occupations, a situation which makes it difficult for them to be able to cater for the needs of their

children. It is therefore a common practice to see children from such backgrounds engaging in sex in exchange for money and other favors. Children who got involved in this kind of activity were perceived as persons who understood the consequences of their actions.

The acceptable sexual behaviors as defined by the Ga community illustrate "the incongruity between its [CSA] common incidence and the inability of people to talk about it amounts to a monstrous denial of child sex abuse, but such a denial is an entrenched norm" (Ronai 1995:418). This culture of silence according to Ronai (1995) isolates victims of CSA from opportunities that would make it possible for them to share their experiences with others. The only option available for these victims of CSA is for them to accept the meanings and labels placed on them by their abusers (Ronai 1995). Children in the Ga community who experience forms of sexual abuse described as acceptable are compelled to be silent about their situation. These children will believe they are deviants instead of being victims (Ronai 1995).

Non-Acceptable Sexual Behaviors

The findings of this research suggest three forms of sexual behaviors that were considered abnormal in the Ga community. Sexual activities with children that were regarded as abnormal received some attention from community members. These are sexual activities that resulted in physical injury of the child, sexual activities between persons of the same sex, and sexual relations between adults (usually males) and children with a wide age gap.

Physical Injury

It was mentioned that any sexual abuse where the child's health was seriously affected attracted sanctions from the community or was reported to the police. For instance, a situation where medical reports indicated that a child's womb was destroyed or that such a victim sustained serious physical injuries or was infected with HIV caused an outcry among community members. In such situations, every effort was made for the perpetrator to be punished. It was also realized that such persons usually fled the community for fear of being beaten or hurt by an angry mob before being sanctioned. CSA has been identified as having serious immediate and long-term physical and health effects on children. The short-term physical effects of CSA have been recognized as bruises, wounds, or fractures, and infections including HIV (Zambia Ministry of Education 2011). The long-term effects, on the other hand, include chronic pelvic pain, painful menstruation, pelvic inflammatory disease, irregular vaginal bleeding, and complications with child birth (Heise and Garcia-Moreno 2002). Physical injuries caused to a child through CSA were therefore regarded as a serious crime in the Ga community and offenders are punished.

Same Sex

Studies show that same sex relationships are not accepted in most African settings, but viewed as a taboo and un-African (Morgan and Wieringa 2005). According to Morgan and Wieringa (2005),

persons involved in same sex relationships often lived in secrecy due to the stigma associated with their practice. A recent report in the media states that suspected gays and lesbians at a birthday party celebration in James Town were attacked by a mob with bottles and cutlasses and their houses destroyed (see: myjoyonline.com). The implication of this on children who are sexually abused by adults of the same sex can have their experiences shrouded in silence and secrecy for fear that society will be prejudiced against them. It is, therefore, difficult for abused children in this category to receive help from their communities, if any exists.

Wide Age Gap

The norm in most cultures in Ghana, where men are permitted to marry younger women (Azu 1974), makes it acceptable for sexual relations to take place between older men and younger children. The Ga communities do not frown upon such sexual relations, especially with the consent of the child. Based on the findings of the study, it is regarded as abnormal only when the age gap between the two is relatively wide. The study showed that it was difficult to come to terms with adults who had sexual intercourse with infants or children as young as five years of age. Such acts were regarded as child rape which mostly involves injury to the child. This form of sexual act is said to traumatize a child who sometimes displays abnormal behavior. An adult who commits such an act is believed to deserve punishment in the Ga community.

Implications for Policy

Although this study has some limitations, the findings of this study have some implications to policy. Firstly, the study shows that among the Ga, socio-cultural factors, more than the legal definition, influence their constructions of CSA. As a result, adult members in the Ga community are likely to abuse children sexually when the laws are not enforced. Therefore, it is imperative on the part of the government to enforce and strengthen the laws that seek to protect children from sexual abuse in the Ga community. Additionally, community sensitization programs should be organized periodically by the Department of Social Welfare, the DOVVSU of the Ghana Police Service, and the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) in collaboration with local authorities to educate community members on the legal stance of CSA. The media should also be given proper training on how to report cases of CSA, since this is a major avenue where perceptions about the phenomenon are formed.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The strength of this study is in its ability to allow the voices of the community members to share their realities of CSA in their communities. However, the study has some limitations. The small sample size, which is typical of qualitative studies, makes it difficult to generalize the findings of the study to the whole of the Ga commu-

nity. The study is also confined to one region of Ghana. It is recommended that comprehensive study similar to this one be carried out across different socio-cultural settings to present diverse views on the social constructions of CSA in Ghana.

Conclusion

This study has increased our understanding of the social constructions of CSA and described the extent to which these cultural beliefs perpetuate the cycle of CSA in the Ga community. Acceptable sexual activities and non-acceptable sexual activities between adults and children defined the social constructions of CSA in the communities studied. These distinctions provide an avenue for sexually abused children to internalize beliefs that blame them for their abuse. Victims of CSA are therefore perceived as not living up to the standards society has set for them instead of punishing the offenders (Tetteh and Markwei 2018). The implication of this is that these victims do not receive social support to deal with their traumatic experience. The media narratives and (mis)representations of CSA can influence public perceptions, attitudes, and actions that people have towards the problem. Hence, the constructions of CSA in the Ga community in modern times are largely influenced by its representation in the media. As a result, the media can play a key role in correcting the misconceptions about CSA through proper reporting. A clear understanding of CSA will minimize its occurrence and also provide effective support to its victims.

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