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Status, privilege and gender inequality: Cultures of male impunity and entitlement in the sexual abuse of children– lessons from a Caribbean study

Abstract

In the wake of current high profile cases of child sexual abuse in the UK, this article draws international lessons from a Caribbean study to demonstrate that underpinning social values can create the conditions in which the sexual victimisation of children might be regarded as unremarkable and generate perceptions of impunity. The analysis presented gives rise to a *synergistic approach* to examining the inter-connected, multi-layered facets of abuse in order to generate multi-level activities (conceptual, material, structural) based on local realities that together, can produce effects (prevention of victimisation) that are greater than their individual parts.

Key words

Child sexual abuse, patriarchy, gender inequality, childhood, Caribbean

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Introduction

In critically engaging with the problem of child sexual abuse at structural, discursive and situated levels (Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 1998), research has often started from the wrong starting point, in that perspectives on abuse constructed in the academy and then deployed to measure local prevalence, do little to generate understandings of its meanings.

Utilising a *situated knowledge* paradigm; that is, producing understandings of abuse *out of* the conditions that create it, a study of adults' views of child sexual abuse in six Caribbean countries was carried out. In this article, I examine the structural underpinnings of child sexual abuse and propose a way of theorising about the problem which situates understandings more clearly within a frame of society, family structure, socio-economic specificity and historic legacy.

The persistence and pervasiveness of child sexual abuse

Awareness of sexual abuse as a specific problem that is distinct from (if related to), other forms of child abuse has been a focus of academic scholarship for the last forty years or so. The global pervasiveness of the problem was confirmed in an international prevalence study (Finklehor, 1994) when victimisation rates of 27 per cent for women and 16 per cent for men were reported. While many forms of child sexual abuse seem constant, changing social and economic landscapes have provided opportunities for new forms of exploitation such as internet child abuse (Dombrowski, Gischlar & Durst, 2007) and the commercialisation of childhood sexuality (Bailey, 2011). Although not a new trend, the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and child trafficking have also reached new heights (UNICEF, 2006; Brown and Barrett, 2002). There is clear evidence too, that child sexual abuse is not only pervasive but persistent; and this, despite the introduction in many countries

of legislative, policy and practice initiatives to address it. A review of 39 studies from 21 countries compared with Finklehor's 1994 study suggested that over a decade later, little had changed (Pereda, Guilera, Forns & Gómez-Benito, 2009). Women are said to be abused at 1½ to 3 times the rate for men however inhibiting factors in the reporting of the sexual abuse of boys are widely understood to conceal the extent of male victimisation (Romano and De Luca, 2001). Far from being a one-time traumatic event, childhood sexual abuse often co-occurs with other types of maltreatment, increases vulnerability to further victimization and leads to multiple problems that impact throughout the life cycle (Widom, Czaja & Dutton, 2008).

Theoretical and definitional imposition

Scholarship on child sexual abuse and victimisation has largely been predicated on theoretical imposition which privileges universalist assumptions. The literature is dominated by research derived mainly from western contexts which, deployed upon local data in other settings then confirms rather than contests received theory. This was illustrated in a recent meta-analysis of global prevalence which stated:

In self-report studies, participants are sometimes asked questions about CSA without specification of experiences or behaviours that constitute CSA. The answers to these questions may be heavily influenced by the participants' subjective perceptions and definitions of CSA. An extreme example is "Have you been sexually abused?"...How CSA is defined and subsequently operationalized might have an impact on the reported prevalence (Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011, p. 1).

This body of research, rich and of undoubted value is the evidence base from which categories of abuse have been constructed and child protection systems in many countries

crafted. These systems are often surveillance and investigation-driven, can be overly bureaucratic and may themselves be experienced as harmful by children and families (Lonne *et al*, 2009; Broadhurst *et al*, 2009). Furthermore, they are costly to administer. In the USA the child protection ‘industry’ costs over \$US100 billion annually while in the UK, the cost of maintaining child protection systems is estimated at over £1 billion a year (Lonne *et al*, 2009). For income-poor countries and those beginning to grapple with strategies to reduce the prevalence of child sexual abuse and ameliorate its effects, replicating costly child protection interventions may be neither possible nor desirable.

This article reports on a study which reveals the ways in which the dynamics of patriarchy and gender collide with constructions of childhood to create environments in which the sexual victimisation of children is both perpetuated and silenced. Understanding how ordinary people, in their everyday lives and localities conceptualise abuse can better guide us towards child protection interventions that are context-relevant and, may be more cost effective and sustainable.

Methods

A study of adults’ perceptions and experiences of child sexual abuse was carried out in six Caribbean countries, purposively selected for regional representativeness: Anguilla, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat and St. Kitts and Nevis. Approval was granted by the University Ethics Committee and a comprehensive ethics protocol followed. A robust mixed-methods design was used with research quality maintained through ongoing critical scrutiny of process and ontological reflection.

A theoretically derived survey instrument: the Perceptions, Attitudes and Opinions Questionnaire (PAOQ) was designed, subject to test/re-test reliability checks and

administered to a representative sample of 859 men and women aged 18 years and above (the sample comprised one-third men and two-thirds women) recruited through a multi-staged cluster pro-rata sampling strategy. Using a Likert measurement scale, the PAOQ is a self-reporting questionnaire containing 73 items divided into five sections: construction of childhood, perceptions of abuse, attitudes to those involved, opinions on action needed, and personal experiences of abuse and protection. The survey results were explored for deeper meaning through focus group discussions with men, women and mixed-gender groups across six different settings (church, community, sport/leisure, professional, business, college). A stakeholder analysis tool ensured representation across age, parenting status, education and socio-economic background. A total of 36 focus groups took place (six in each country) and an equal number of men and women (280 in total) participated. Finally, narrative interviews were carried out with eleven self-selecting adult survivors recruited through local media. The survey data were analysed using SPSS (current version), focus group data analysed using a template method (King, 2004) and narrative interviews analysed using the 'Listening Guide' approach (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). This article draws primarily on qualitative data and only reports on themes that were common across all the countries (although there were country-specific differences in demographic, economic or geographic variables, when disaggregated by country, sample sizes were too small to generate any meaningful conceptual or socio-cultural differences). Quotes used below are illustrative and while they are views of individual respondents, they reflect perceptions that frequently occurred in the analysis. Findings derived from qualitative studies are not generalisable, however the robust mixed-methods design provides a constitutive basis for the analysis presented.

Analysis and discussion

For the purposes of this article, four major themes are explored: constructions of childhood; conceptualisations of abuse; family structure, and gender inequality and economic sex exchange.

Constructions of childhood

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines ‘child’ as someone under the age of 18 years and, as signatories to the Convention, many Caribbean governments are striving towards harmonising domestic law with this definition. Within the study, age was the most commonly accepted social marker for the status ‘child’, with most respondents of the view that children were children at least until the age of 16 years, the legal age of sexual consent in most Caribbean countries. However, in exploring the conceptualisation of childhood as a bounded category and the existence of other markers of transition to adulthood, respondents were asked whether the onset of puberty marked the end of childhood. Most respondents (77.2 per cent, 663) did not agree with this although 18 per cent (155) did or were not sure.

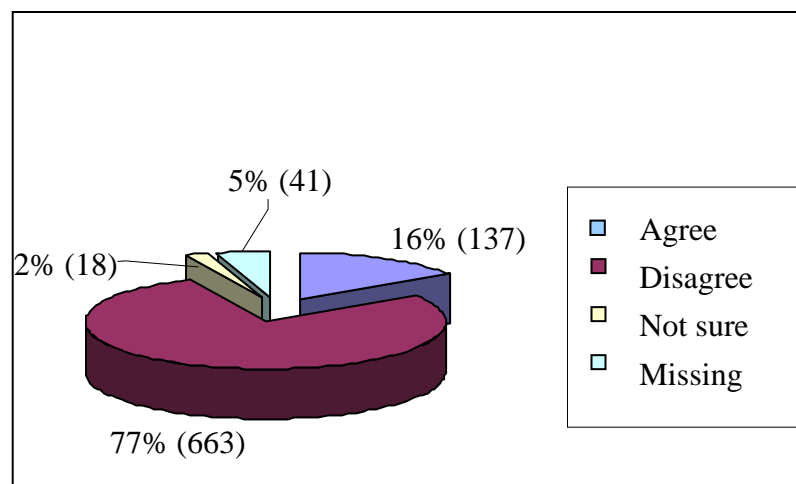


Figure 1. Puberty as a marker of the end of childhood

Focus group participants suggested that transition to adulthood is determined not only by age but by biological maturation and perceptions of readiness. Linked to patriarchal values and underscored by assumptions of male sexual entitlement, some men indicated that they considered girls to be legitimate sexual targets once they had begun menstruating:

‘...the case is that men have the inner tendency of finding girls sexually accessible once they have passed puberty’.

This view was also held by some women, illustrated by examples of mothers permitting their daughters to have sex with men as a means of generating income for the family if the girl had reached a stage of development considered appropriate.

While the Convention on the Rights of the Child has led to ‘age’ rather than ‘stage’ being the prime determinant of childhood, this neatly sidesteps the fact that conceptualization of childhood is contested terrain (Archard, 2004). There can be little doubt that universal agreement on the age under which a child is considered vulnerable and therefore in need of special protection and rights endorsement has provided critical policy leverage to tackle abuses against children, different understandings of childhood based on socio-cultural specificity and historical legacy may undermine these positions. As James and Prout (1997, p3) argue, ‘it is biological immaturity rather than childhood which is a universal and natural feature of human groups, for ways of understanding this period of human life –the institution of childhood –vary cross-culturally’. Some communities, for example, the Acholi tribe of Northern Uganda (see Ochen et al., 2012) consider that a child retains this designation regardless of age until culturally-prescribed rituals signifying acceptance into adulthood have been completed. Here, the ‘child’ benefits from collective responsibility for care and protection even if the child is over the age of 18 and in other settings would be deemed an

adult. Yet as indicated in this study, different perceptions of childhood may expose children to circumstances of heightened risk, on the basis that they are viewed as having acquired attributes associated with adulthood. Perceptions of readiness linked to physical maturation and emerging sexualities were the prime determinants for many respondents as to whether it was appropriate or not for a child to be involved in sexual activity. Explored in relation to the work of Caribbean scholars these views on sexuality appear to be cast through a complex cultural prism comprising sexual prowess as a primary signifier of masculinity and desirability as a signifier of femininity (Reddock, 2004) and, the celebration of male heterosexual desire in popular culture and everyday life (Chevannes, 2001).

The oppositional spaces countering these social processes are primarily occupied by institutions (such as schools and the Church) which invoke deep moral and religious taboos about sex and which suppress sexual expression (Barrow, 2005). In the absence of an alternative discourse centred on healthy sexualities, other behaviours are brought to the fore. Firstly, the premature sexualisation of children is reported to be widespread and secondly some forms of sexual abuse are recast as sexual initiation and claimed as a cultural rite of passage. For example, in the few cases where the sexual abuse of boys by women was cited, participants suggested this would be regarded not as abuse but as 'initiation' into a heterosexual version of manhood:

'...that guy is a warrior!' (Male Focus Group Participant)

In investigating sexual initiation further, survey respondents were asked to comment on the statement 'sexual activity between adults and children is never OK no matter what'; most survey respondents (76 per cent, N= 653) agreed with this, however, 22.5 per cent (N= 161) thought there were circumstances when sexual activity between adults and children was okay or else were not sure. Discussed further in focus groups, the view was expressed that fathers who commit incest often do so in the belief that initiation into sex is an important stage

towards their daughters becoming women and the 'right' to initiate is bestowed on them (fathers) by virtue of the fact that they are the heads of households:

'..they had to make the way first ...' (Male Focus Group Participant).

This perception was mirrored in the survey with 20.6 per cent (N=177) of respondents stating either that they were unsure or agreeing that where it is a man's role to provide for his children, it should be up to him to decide when and with whom his children should engage in sex. It is important to stress that these views were held by only a minority of respondents and that most people (74.6 per cent, N=641) did not agree with this. Nevertheless it is telling that in both the survey and focus groups, a significant number of both men and women expressed views that signal the cultural embeddedness of male sexual entitlement. The study suggests that conceptualisations of childhood may be used to explain why some children are sexually abused in order to service male sexual desire, reflecting dynamics of patriarchy and culturally reified masculinities that are predicated on sexual prowess, sexual-role belief attribution and sexual entitlement. This is also supported in the wider literature (see for example, Quas, *et al.* 2002).

Conceptualising sexual abuse

While most respondents had a clear understanding about the behaviours that constitute sexual abuse, the boundaries were often blurred and the term 'sexual abuse' may be too limiting to fully capture the complexity and multiple ways in which sexual behaviour can harm children and young people. This aside, the following behaviours were identified as sexual abuse: rape; sexual intercourse with a pre-pubescent child; incest; children used as sexual objects in videos and photos; exposure to adult sexual material and the intrusive sexualised touching of a child. Using these as operational criteria, child sexual abuse was revealed as an extensive social problem which was considered to be on the increase. There was widespread recognition that in addition to a wide range of psychopathologies, sexual abuse was heavily

implicated in the region's high number of teenage pregnancies, illegal abortions, and an HIV prevalence rate second only to sub-Saharan Africa. The findings suggest both a heightened awareness of child sexual abuse and an increasing incidence, due in large part to new forms of abuse, such as technology-related forms of abuse and the growth of sex trade markets.

Most children who are subject to sexual victimization in the Caribbean, as elsewhere, are girls however the abuse of boys was also reported although it was felt that homophobia and myths associating the abuse of boys with homosexuality often made it difficult for this to be openly acknowledged. Several forms of sexual victimization were identified however, for the purposes of this article, two main forms of abuse: intra-familial abuse (abuse that happens in the privacy of the home) and transactional sexual abuse are discussed. These forms of abuse have common roots at the macro level (such as the status of children, patricentricity and gender inequality) and are often linked at the micro level; for instance, a child abused at an early age in the family seems at increased risk of commercial sexual exploitation by someone outside the family in later years. Nevertheless, these different forms of abuse also have different characteristics, for example intra-familial abuse was said to be sustained by secrecy, fear and power/powerlessness while transactional sexual abuse is sustained largely by societal values, gender-based poverty, the promotion of sex as a commodity and other manifestations of consumerism. Transactional sexual abuse largely involves adolescents while intra-familial sexual abuse often begins while the child is quite young and continues until mid or late adolescence. In many cases victimization extends to adulthood and becomes a feature of the survivors' interpersonal relationships in later life. Often the abuse ceases at the point at which the young person is beginning to show an interest in boy/girlfriends or once the abuser has turned his attention to a younger child. Recollecting her experience, one respondent stated:

'Do you know what the biggest joke is?...I stopped him because I got a boyfriend. Actually, he stopped himself when I got a boyfriend. As if I were now too tainted for him. Too dirty. He stopped speaking to me, as if he were my boyfriend and I left him for another man!' (J, Survivor)

Family structure

As with studies elsewhere, most child sexual abuse was said to take place in the home within the family; occurring in all communities, across social class, educational background, religious affiliation and professional status. Intra-familial abuse was characterized as being secretive and invisible with the victims being silenced through a range of covert behaviours and social codes within families. Abusers are most often male and while some abuse by women was reported, the key role women were said to play was in denying or failing to act on abuse when they were aware of it. Mothers who refused to accept abuse that took place within the family or, were said to be accepting of transactional abuse *outside* the family were held as partially culpable. This latter behaviour even had its own term '*Mothers pimping their children*'. While children were also said to be sexually victimized by other children, the major risk was men (primarily fathers, step-fathers and mothers' boyfriends) with a sexual interest in children. A stepfather implies a more stable relationship than the status 'mother's boyfriend' and suggests the adoption of a parenting role (although this was not investigated) however, no distinction between the terms was made in the study and both were used interchangeably. Nevertheless the findings suggest there is a distinction to be made between a household in which there is a stable stepfather over the course of a child's childhood or several visiting boyfriends. I turn now to exploring this form of family structure.

Influenced by the convergence of a unique set of historical and socioeconomic factors such as slavery and indentureship, diverse cultural and religious traditions and, mass migration

fuelled by post-colonial labour shortages, the Caribbean family has emerged as adaptive and heterogeneous. In contrast to the narrow etic lens of early Eurocentric sociologists who viewed deviation from postcolonial family norms as dysfunctional, Caribbean scholars, utilising a 'culture of kinship' lens have generated epistemic insights which show that out of this social and historical meld, healthy and adaptive family structures have been generated (Barrow, 2005 and Reddock, 2004). Reclaiming this intellectual territory has been instructive, enabling us to see that far from breaking down as the Church, State and media often declare, the Caribbean family is alive, well and intact (Sogren, 2011). The family is described as a diverse, adaptive and fluid network of structural relationships (not simply, a household unit) through which the functions of child rearing, physical and economic needs, interpersonal relationships, induction of cultural and religious values are negotiated and managed. There are several forms that these structural arrangements take: the common law union; extended families; legal marriage; and the single female-headed household (often involving a 'visiting' relationship with a male partner). Other family forms such as gay couples and sibling-headed households also exist but are less common. Within the study, the female-headed household, with the mother engaged in visiting relationships with one or several boyfriends was reported as commonplace, especially among lower socio-economic groups and while abuse takes place in all types of family, specific risks for children were said to be connected to this structure. In the visiting relationship, the boyfriend visits his female partner for companionship and intimate relations and may stay for periods of time. Although marriage may be a goal, especially for the woman, permanence is not generally a condition of the arrangement although economic support from the man is. In some countries female-headed households account for almost half of all families; for example, in 2006, 44.4 per cent of households in Barbados were said to be female-headed (Barbados Statistical Service, 2006). The visiting alliance is reported as presenting women with sexual, physical and

economic freedoms and is regarded by some as a viable and valid form of economic security in a societal context characterised by gender inequality and feminised poverty (Dunn, 2001; Kempadoo and Dunn, 2001).

The central discursive theme running through scholarship on the Caribbean family – matrifocality, emphasises the mother (or grandmother) at its centre based on widespread recognition that it is women who bear most responsibility for family needs and the belief that motherhood is central to womanhood (Durant-Gonzalez, 1982; Barrow, 2005; Barrow, 2010; Sogren, 2011). Matrifocality and its corollary, the rise and reification of the stereotype of the Caribbean woman as black matriarch are important not only in centre-ing women but also because in counterpoint, Caribbean men have often been cast as: ‘. . . ‘irresponsible’ and ‘marginal’ as husbands and fathers and written out of the discourse of Caribbean kinship, [with] masculine symbolic space being defined as ‘outside’ the home and family circle’ (Barrow, 2010). These dialectical positions mask two realities: firstly, that with the persistence of gender inequality and feminised poverty, the status of women overall may not be improved by these arrangements and many women experience hegemonic masculinity as oppressive. Whether matrifocality is a fiction or a reflection of lived reality depends also upon whether the power in the family (such as property, inheritance, interpersonal and household rights) is resident in women to the same extent that it is in men. The question arises however, as to how likely it is that those who bear the greatest burden of poverty, the largest share of familial responsibility and are often working in low-paid jobs, are empowered in these other spheres of social life. Even in female-headed households men are often assigned or assume the title of ‘head’ whether or not they perform major roles within the family (St. Bernard, 1997) and family values based on male dominance are common (Moses, 2001). Within this study, despite the guise of independence, women as head of households

were often so reliant upon men for economic needs that they were said to sometimes ignore the abuse of children to ensure the family's survival; as one woman explained: *'She has to sacrifice the one to feed the five'*. Emotional, social and economic dependence appeared to have made it difficult for some women to confront abuse:

'Sometimes I really ask myself why my Mum stayed there and let that happen to me; she never listen'.

'When he was coming over by us, I told Mummy. I told her look, this man has children with his children and you're letting him come in here with us? But she never took me on. She said she needs money to mind me, I better hush'.

Although beyond the remit of this article, critical scrutiny of political economies in the post-colonial Caribbean and the interrogation of European culture and imperialism is essential in order to understand the interface between gender and economic power, since these factors are deeply implicated in the present-day realities described above (Young, 1990).

The second reality is that the ideological persuasion of the persistence of this distinct male identity evades the somewhat inconvenient truth that Caribbean masculinities are dependent on the affirmation of both actors in the male-female interaction, are themselves constructed out of the same socio-historic ferment that gives rise to matrifocality and reflect an interpersonal response to cultural expectations that may be as troubling to men as to women. This dominant typology of masculinity has also succeeded in marginalising men whose identities are as much predicated on the roles of fatherhood, provider and protector as on other signifiers (Brown, Newland, Anderson & Chevannes, 1997; Chevannes, 2001; Lewis, 2004; Barrow, 1998; Reynolds, 2001). Nevertheless, diverse, contradictory and heterogeneous configurations aside, tightly woven into Caribbean constructions of masculinity and patriarchy are views about sex, sexual entitlement and power (especially

over sexual decision-making) which, played out within the context of family relations contribute to gender-based violence, child sexual abuse and create a ‘culture of male omnipotence’ (Quamina-Aiyejina and Brathwaite, 2005; Chevannes, 2001).

Gender inequality and economic sex exchange

‘Economic sexual exchange’, ‘prostitution’, ‘sex-trade’ and ‘commercial sexual exploitation’ are all terms used to describe the exchange of sex in return for money, goods or favours. In relation to children, I use the phrase ‘transactional sexual abuse’ (TSA) to reflect the nature of the problem – transactions in which sex is traded but which involves the abuse of adult authority, trust and power, and which exploits the needs, vulnerabilities and emerging sexualities of children and young people. ‘Transactional sexual abuse’ places the responsibility for this behaviour with the men who engage in sex with girls (and boys) (regardless of who benefits materially) while ‘commercial sexual exploitation’ also focuses attention on those who derive material benefit. In the study, TSA was reported as being widespread and while it primarily involves girls and older men, increasingly boys were said to be exploited in this way. Transactional sexual abuse was described as quite visible, an ‘*open secret*’ and often happened with the full knowledge of parents, communities and officials. It was considered a firmly entrenched and established pattern of behaviour that did not need to be hidden since, reflecting a lived belief about male omnipotence, was unlikely to attract penalty or even disapproval. Transactional sexual abuse was said to be committed by men at all levels of society and was regarded primarily as economic exploitation rather than as abuse:

‘Poverty is a big factor. In certain economic strata, this is the norm’.

'... a lot of older men are taking advantage of our little boys, they are very young children aged 13-14 years being paid to have sex and then the child walks away to buy a pair of shoes or something else'.

Globally, commercialisation sexual exploitation (CSE) is escalating (UN, 2005) and the Caribbean has many of the negative social and economic characteristics generally associated with CSE such as high unemployment rates, social class and gender inequalities and social deprivation (UNICEF, 2006). The practice takes place both within the home when the provision of economic support for the family by a boyfriend (this can apply to marital relations too) is a social expectation in return for sex - and also, outside of the home, where the sex/economic exchange can involve casual or opportunistic relations with tourists, temporary workers or longstanding partners. While the Caribbean is ranked highly in terms of human development, poverty and inequality remain a serious challenge and in common with other countries, female-headed households have a harder time escaping poverty (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2000). As mothers carry the responsibility for children, a visiting relationship in which sex is exchanged in return for economic support may be an important means of supplementing the household income. Some Caribbean scholars have even cast sex trading as a form of economic security that reflects women's resilience and adaptive capacities (Dunn, 2001; Kempadoo and Dunn, 2001; Barrow, 2005). Indeed, it is easy to see why; since sex is an integral aspect of adult relationships, why not ensure that the family benefits materially. The study showed however these relationships may be reduced to a product of functional poverty and consumerism which is incompatible with the values of mutual support and the creation of protective family environments needed for children. I am referring here to the construction of a set of family behaviours in which the converging dynamics of gender inequality, patricentricity and conceptualisations of childhood reinforced

as socio-cultural norms, place children at risk of TSA. In this context, men (and some women) are socialised to believe that economic support entitles men to sex as suggested by these male respondents:

'Men ... are socialised from childhood to give something only if a favour is returned...this sort of behaviour has become the norm... '.

'If I am the breadwinner they [girls] not eating my food for nothing'.

It is important to note, however, that TSA was reported as a common feature of life outside the home too:

'Bus drivers and persons with vehicles use young girls a lot. Particularly young girls going to school who can't afford to pay for bus fare. They trade in transportation for sex'.

This study suggests that the widespread acceptance of transactional sex also influences perceptions of abuse:

'You have a young girl who is 12 years old and all of her friends have the latest cell phones... the guy next door who thinks she looks good takes advantage of the child's vulnerability. The girl may not see it as abuse; she's just getting a cell phone'.

The feminization of poverty along with the increasing commodification of sex is what lies at the heart of these commercial sexual exchange arrangements and it is these structural factors that increase vulnerability to this form of exploitation (Quamina-Aiyejina and Brathwaite, 2005).

Theorising child sexual abuse

This article has demonstrated that child sexual abuse is situated within the frame of gender socialization, culture, family structure, socio-economic conditions and historic legacy and that the circumstances in which children are made vulnerable to sexual victimization are generated through a set of social factors which exist in dialectical and structural relationship with one another. The analysis reveals three sets of factors: those relevant to the environment (structural inequality, commercialisation of sex, culture, feminised poverty, historical legacy); those pertaining to family structure (childhood, patricentricity, gender-roles, power, status, material conditions, sexual behaviours, gender-based violence) and, those influenced by process constructs (gender socialization, socio-cultural reification/affirmation, child-adult transition, normalisation of abuse, social acceptance). The synergising effects of these family and societal factors contribute to sexually harmful behaviours and attitudes which are reproduced and reinforced through process constructs. Through this analysis, we can conceptualise the family and environmental factors as interlocking cogs which are propelled by process factors (which are fluid and constantly changing, rather than fixed) and which turn around each other to drive sexual abuse and exploitation. Each of these categories by itself is an important focus for intervention however the synergising effects of combined action targeting families, environment *and* social processes is likely to produce benefits greater than single interventions alone.

This suggests the need for a *synergistic approach* to tackling abuse which aligns policy and programming for preventing abuse more closely with research on locally produced factors (and the interaction between them) which contribute to it. Such an approach requires simultaneous attention to three domains of social life:

1. Domain 1- environmental factors (in the Caribbean this would include for example, poverty among women and children, sexual cultures predicated on perceptions of male sexual privilege and female availability)
2. Domain 2 – family factors (e.g. vulnerable families, styles of parenting, etc.)
3. Domain 3 – process factors (e.g. gender socialisation, child-adulthood transitioning, how values are passed within and between generations, social sanctioning and so on)

The *synergistic approach* to preventing child sexual abuse offers a framework for analysis of the inter-connected, multi-layered facets of abuse and enables the identification of multi-level activities (conceptual, material, structural and, process) based on local realities to craft strategy and interventions which together, can produce effects (prevention of abuse) that are greater than their individual parts. As praxis, the synergistic approach would generate solutions for specific contexts yet would also have heuristic value for multiple settings. The framework shifts child protection strategy from its emphasis on individual psychopathology to one that lends itself to a ‘whole of society’ approach and increases the potential of engaging people at all levels in targeting the root causes of child sexual abuse.

Policy implications

This theoretical approach offers an expanded base for re-examining ways in which the social processes that drive abuse might be interrupted. For example, the approach indicates the need to open up spaces for young people, men and women to develop a counter-hegemonic consciousness that challenge norms associating masculinity with sexual predation and femininity with sexual availability and that distort the expression of healthy sexualities. The approach also lends itself to problematizing the taken-for-granted and encourages scrutiny of policy and programmes which skirt around, rather than confronts realities. Freed from the constraints of a discursive terrain dominated by a preoccupation with risk and surveillance,

contemplative and creative capacities are released. The shift in emphasis removes the need for delineating those implicated or affected by abuse as ‘abuser’, ‘paedophile’, ‘victim’; terms which generate stigma that in turn leads to silence and burying the problem within its private domains. The synergising approach to abuse prevention requires us to focus on macro-, meso- and chrono-level systems and supports the public health approach which targets whole communities to prevent abuse before it happens and which also disrupts intergenerational abuse.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on original data to explore the convergence of constructions of childhood, male privilege and gender inequality in the reproduction of child sexual abuse and cultures of silence and impunity. Feminist scholarship is rich with theoretical exposition on the links between patriarchy and child sexual abuse and on the roots of gender-based oppression and there exists an extensive body of work which has generated insights into social constructions of childhood (James and Prout, 1997; Holt and Holloway, 2006). What is missing however, are analyses which bridge the epistemic rupture between the two. This article attempts to do just that.

Limitations

The research on which this article is limited in that it has attempted to identify issues at the societal level from a small (though significant) number of self-selecting respondents, and secondly it reports on perceptions of the scale and nature of the problem (as well as lived experiences of abuse), but does not measure actual prevalence based on these conceptualisations. Another limitation, at the discursive level, is the association of ‘culture’ with child abuse and the danger of generating a new set of mythological correlates which may result in pathologizing particular communities and also, in suggesting a totalising and

constant notion of patriarchy, neither of which are intended. 'Culture' is used throughout this paper as shorthand for the dynamic and fluid social processes that embody the popular, expressive, creative, and symbolic aspects of ways of life in *any* setting and thus simply serves as a vehicle for the expression of views about sexual behaviour rather than its cause. Despite its limitations, the insights developed in adopting a *situated* knowledge approach to the study of child sexual abuse enable us to problematize prevailing views about how the problem should be tackled. Furthermore when we allow local data to speak to how practice should evolve, the likelihood of uncovering sexually harmful behaviours to children is increased rather than reduced and possibilities for engaging with communities in utilizing local socio-cultural knowledge of childhood risks in the design of child protection systems is expanded.

In theorizing manifestations of child sexual abuse as the synergistic effects of the interaction of family and environmental factors which through construct processes lead to its perpetuation, the ways in which unequal gender relations are both causes and consequences of sexual abuse are revealed. Rather than universalising claims, this idiographic approach regards knowledge about abuse as a specific product of specific locations, provides multiple possibilities for action and therefore has both epistemic and practice currency.

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