

Knowledge and Social Aspects of Minors Sexual Abuse in Two Communes in Southern Benin: A Study Conducted on Social Workers and Parents of Children

Ella Kossouh^{1,*}, Charles Sossa², Adolphe Kpatchavi³, Badirou Aguemon⁴

¹Doctoral School of Health Sciences of Cotonou, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin

²Regional Institute of Public Health, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin

³Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin

⁴Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin

Received January 19, 2024; Revised July 11, 2024; Accepted August 24, 2024

Cite This Paper in the Following Citation Styles

(a): [1] Ella Kossouh, Charles Sossa, Adolphe Kpatchavi, Badirou Aguemon, "Knowledge and Social Aspects of Minors Sexual Abuse in Two Communes in Southern Benin: A Study Conducted on Social Workers and Parents of Children," *Universal Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 12, No. 5, pp. 793 - 798, 2024. DOI: 10.13189/ujph.2024.120501.

(b): Ella Kossouh, Charles Sossa, Adolphe Kpatchavi, Badirou Aguemon (2024). *Knowledge and Social Aspects of Minors Sexual Abuse in Two Communes in Southern Benin: A Study Conducted on Social Workers and Parents of Children*. *Universal Journal of Public Health*, 12(5), 793 - 798. DOI: 10.13189/ujph.2024.120501.

Copyright©2024 by authors, all rights reserved. Authors agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

Abstract Around the world some children, far from living in a peaceful climate of protection and love, are victims of abuse from adults or older teenagers. The objectives of this work were to describe the level of knowledge of social professionals and parents of children and then to analyze the social aspects of minors sexual abuse in two communes in southern Benin. This was a cross-sectional study on social workers and parents of children who are victims or not of sexual abuse received in social promotion centers in the communes of Abomey-Calavi and So-Ava in southern Benin from 2018 to 2022. The study population consisted of 62 social workers, 129 parents of sexually abused children and 132 parents of children who were not victims. 45.18% of the social workers surveyed had an acceptable mastery of the subject, unlike the parents of children who were victims of sexual violence (20.16%) or not (8.33%), most of whom had an insufficient level. The most common behaviors of parents after the occurrence of sexual abuse on their children were reprimands (78.94%) and compassion (21.05%). The abuse is often committed in conducive family conditions (precariousness and family disorganization) that render children vulnerable and parents unable to protect them. Thus, factors that promote sexual violence against minors include poverty,

promiscuity, and celibacy (single parents). An action plan that puts parental education at the heart of the theory of change based on an appropriate communication strategy, should therefore be developed at the national level, targeting the entire population, especially parents/tutors, social workers, children, teenagers, youth, and community child protection mechanisms.

Keywords Sexual Abuse, Minor, Mental Health, Social Workers

1. Introduction

Every child that's born has the right to grow up in a happy environment. Some children in the world, far from living in a peaceful climate of protection and love, are victims of abuse from adults or older teenagers [1]. Several types of abuse are recorded, including sexual abuse, which represents any contact or interaction (visual, verbal, or psychological) whereby an older person uses a child for their own sexual stimulation or that of a third party [2]. Through violence or seduction, the child is subjected to sexual activities that they are not able to understand (due to

their age and level of psychological development). Minors sexual abuse represents a major public health issue [3].

Those cases of minors sexual abuse remain largely unknown in Africa. Few studies relating to sexual abuse are reported in the African scientific literature. This situation is explained by the taboo nature of sexual abuse in African environment. Although official statistics on the incidence of confirmed cases of minors sexual abuse are not systematically collected or reported, recent studies have shown that those cases are not uncommon in society [1]. The results of these studies reveal a prevalence ranging from 9.9% to 37.8% in some African countries such as South Africa, Tanzania, and Kenya. The sexual abuse suffered by children often occurs repeatedly and over prolonged periods in various places including homes, institutions, or other service environments. Those cases of abuse involve family members, close people, acquaintances, caregivers, and even professionals from other fields [2]. A study conducted in Senegal revealed that the victims of those cases of abuse were mostly girls (84.70%), among whom 45.50% were aged 6 to 10 years old and 37.30% were aged 11 to 16 years old [3].

The consequences are numerous and affect several areas of the child's life. On the psychosocial level, those cases of abuse often remain silent, but the trauma caused is intense and lasting. The psychic functioning of children tries to repress this traumatic event [4]. This leads to several consequences in these children, including emotional disturbances, anxiety, fear, suicidal thoughts, as well as disorders related to the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, or any other addictive substance [5].

The objectives of this work were to describe the level of knowledge of social professionals and parents of children, and then to analyze the social aspects of minors sexual abuse in two communes in southern Benin.

2. Methods

2.1. Type of Study

It was a cross-sectional study on social workers and parents of children victims or non-victims of sexual abuse received at the social promotion centers in the communes of Abomey-Calavi and So-Ava in southern Benin from 2018 to 2022.

2.2. Study Population

The study participants were social workers and parents of children aged 0 to 18 years. A total of 62 social workers working in the social promotion centers (SPC) in charge of victims of sexual abuse were surveyed. These workers had

been working in the communes of So-Ava and Abomey-Calavi for at least two years. They included social workers, psychologists or legal experts, and administrative staff. The surveyed parents had children aged 0 to 18 years who were victims (129) or non-victims (132) of sexual abuse. These parents had children who had been cared for in one of the social promotion centers (SPC) in the communes of So-Ava and Abomey-Calavi between 2018 and 2022.

The sampling method was non-probabilistic. For the selection of social workers, it was a reasoned choice. For parents/tutors, it was an exhaustive selection for parents/tutors of children who were victims of sexual abuse. Regarding parents/tutors of children who were not victims of sexual abuse, it was also an exhaustive selection that considered all individuals who were welcomed in the social promotion centers (SPC) in So-Ava and Abomey-Calavi during the data collection period in the field and were eligible for the study.

The parents or tutors of children under 18 provided their informed written consent after the study protocol was explained and their questions were answered. The selected parents of children who were not victims of sexual abuse were those who had visited one of the social promotion centers for reasons other than minors sexual abuse. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles and received approval from the National Committee for Scientific Research in Health (CNRSS).

Participants' knowledge was assessed on sexual violence against minors, its consequences, contributing factors, and related social aspects. Table 1 summarizes the main questions asked and points of attention considered in the data analysis.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques and Tools

All participants responded to a questionnaire to assess their knowledge of minors sexual abuse. Demographic data and socioeconomic variables were collected from the parents of children who were victims or non-victims of sexual abuse. These questions were asked to participants by trained members of the research team using a semi-structured interview guide.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

The collected data are processed and grouped into themes. Participants' opinions were categorized by theme to bring out central ideas. Word-for-word transcription allowed for the extraction of verbatim responses, which were then analyzed in relation to the specific objective. Some qualitative variables were expressed in percentages, while others were grouped into themes.

Table 1. Summary of the main questions asked and points of attention considered in the data analysis

Main questions asked	Comments
Level of Knowledge of social workers and parents of children	
What does the term "sexual violence against minors" evoke for the common Beninese people?	-
Social perception/representation of sexual violence against minors	
What is the common social perception/representation of sexual violence against minors in Benin?	They were encouraged to express their sensitivity towards sexual violence against minors.
Behaviors towards sexual violence against minors	
How does the Beninese population behave towards victims of sexual violence against minors?	They were encouraged to express their judgment on the victims, their judgment on the perpetrators, as well as how they behave or could behave with them:
What are the behaviors of the Beninese population towards perpetrators of sexual violence against minors?	- protecting the victims or not - stigmatizing the victims or not - reporting or covering up the perpetrators
Mechanisms implemented within households, at the community level, to fight against sexual violence against minors	
How do various communities in Benin organize the prevention of sexual violence against minors?	A focus was placed on their perception of the importance or non-importance of resorting to measures for the prevention of sexual violence against minors, as well as the care of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence.
Do families in Benin take specific measures to prevent and fight against sexual violence against minors?	We have identified, in the responses, the existing mechanisms within the community in general, accepted by all, related to sexual violence against minors.
If yes, tell us about some mechanisms implemented within households to fight against sexual violence against minors.	
Evaluation of the response to sexual abuse of minors	
What can you say about the effectiveness of the strategies implemented to fight against sexual violence against minors in Benin?	Addressed to the surveyed social workers

3. Results

3.1. Description of the Study Population

A total of 323 individuals were surveyed, of whom 39.94% were parents of children who were victims of violence, 40.86% were parents of children who were non-victims of violence, and 19.2% were social workers.

3.2. Socio Demographic Characteristics of Parents of Children Victims of Sexual Abuse

Parents of children who are victims of sexual abuse were mostly (68.99%) aged 35 years and above. Mothers or female guardians were the most represented (80.61%). Those parents mostly lived (64.34%) in the commune of Abomey-Calavi.

Mothers or female guardians were the most represented

(50.76%) among parents of children who were non-victims of sexual abuse, followed by fathers (49.24%). The surveyed parents of children who were non-victims of sexual abuse were the majority (77.27%) aged 35 years or above and resided mostly (71.21%) in the communes of Abomey-Calavi. Table 2 presents the repartition of parents of children who are victims and non-victims of sexual violence, surveyed according to their socio-demographic characteristics.

3.3. Level of Knowledge of Social Workers and Parents of Children

The overall level of knowledge about minors sexual abuse was deemed perfect or acceptable in 32.5% of the surveyed individuals. Table 3 presents the distribution of surveyed individuals according to their level of knowledge.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of parents of children who are victims and non-victims of sexual abuse (n=129), Abomey-Calavi and So-Ava, 2022

	Parents of children victims of sexual abuse (n=)		Parents of children non victims of sexual abuse (n=)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender	129	100	132	100
<i>Male</i>	25	19,39	65	49,24
<i>Female</i>	104	80,61	67	50,76
Age				
<i>[15; 25]</i>	16	12,4	5	3,79
<i>[25; 35]</i>	24	18,6	25	18,94
<i>[35; 45]</i>	35	27,13	56	42,42
<i>≥45</i>	54	41,86	46	34,85
Residence				
<i>Abomey-Calavi</i>	83	64,34	94	71,21
<i>So-Ava</i>	46	35,66	38	28,79

Table 3. Distribution of surveyed individuals according to their level of knowledge. (n=323), Abomey-calavi and So-Ava, 2022

Surveyed group	Knowledge of child sexual abuse n(%)		
	<i>Perfect mastery</i>	<i>Acceptable mastery</i>	<i>Insufficient mastery</i>
Social workers	11 (17,74)	28 (45,18)	23 (37,09)
Parents of children victims of sexual abuse	11 (8,53)	26 (20,16)	92 (71,32)
Parents of children non- victims of sexual abuse	18 (13,64)	11 (8,33)	103 (78,03)
Total	40 (12,38)	65 (20,12)	218 (67,49)

Chi2 = 38,2; p-value = 0,000

Among the parents of children who were victims of sexual violence, 8.53% had a perfect mastery of the concepts related to sexual violence against minors, compared to 13.64% and 17.74%, respectively, among parents of children who were non-victims of sexual violence and among social workers. Furthermore, the vast majority (45.18%) of surveyed social workers had an acceptable mastery of the subject, unlike the parents of children who were victims of sexual violence (71.32%) or non-victims (78.03%), who mostly had an insufficient level of knowledge.

Social Perception/Representation of Sexual Violence against Minors

The responses of the surveyed individuals can be summarized as follows: "Outside of cultural contexts where this practice is accepted, sexual violence against minors is generally considered a scourge. In the majority, many believe that it doesn't really exist, and very few are aware of the efforts needed to fight against this".

Family Reality of the Victims

The parents of children who were victims of sexual violence surveyed lived in precarious socio-economic

conditions. They were mostly self-employed professionals and were traders, artisans, or farmers. The children, for the most part, were not raised by their biological parents or were raised by a single parent, divorced parent, or remarried parent. These precarious socio-economic conditions expose these children to sexual abuse.

Attitudes towards Sexual Violence against Minors

The first reactions of parents after the occurrence of sexual abuse on their children are protection and compassion, but sometimes denial or rejection (characterized by insults and the widening of the gap between the child and their parents).

An observation made by a social worker was that,

"Some individuals have a negative reaction towards minors who are victims of sexual violence by giving them nicknames with sexual connotations or considering them as having provoked the violence through their behavior/dress and lack of education. They trivialize the harmful consequences of those cases of abuse on the victim's life and do not always provide the necessary support. Also, they prefer to conceal the act and leave everything in God's hands."

Mechanisms Implemented within Households and at the Community Level to Fight against Sexual Violence against Minors

The prevention measures against sexual abuse mentioned by the surveyed parents are numerous. These include:

- Sensitization campaigns conducted in schools or on radio by NGOs.
- Communications about tests and laws protecting women and girls to encourage behavioral change.
- Zero Tolerance campaigns against violence against women and girls.

The low commitment of parents to protect their children against sexual abuse is explained by the denial of sexual violence against minors within society. This practice is defined within the society as a reality in Western countries. According to a surveyed professional,

“Outside of cultural contexts where this practice is accepted, sexual violence against minors is generally considered a scourge. In the majority, many believe that it doesn't really exist, and very few are aware of the efforts needed to fight against this.”

Appreciation of the Response to Minors Sexual Abuse

Several strategies have been implemented to fight against sexual violence against minors within the community. The most important part of these strategies includes prevention interventions through sensitizations conducted by private NGOs, social professionals (implementing the strategic axes of the national child protection policy), or communal protection units. The strategies implemented for the care of victims include reporting cases, their medical (psychological and clinical) care, and judicial proceedings.

4. Discussion

The family context experienced by the surveyed children reveals parents facing difficulties in providing their children with the necessary protection and supervision against potential sexual abuse. Moreover, these are families in which parents and children communicate very little. Issues of sexuality and children's rights are almost never discussed. The consequences of the breakdown of the family structure (divorced parents, single parents) have been identified in several studies as risk factors of children's sexual abuse [6]. Children are often left to their own selves, sometimes living in the world of deviance and thus exposing themselves to sexual abuse.

The parents of the victims themselves feel ashamed and fear that their children will be rejected by the surrounding. This leads to an underreporting of cases and a delay or lack of care for the victims. According to those surveyed, the underreporting is also explained by the intimidation and

pressure that the perpetrator exerts on the child to silence them. In many cases, it is changes in the children's behavior that have aroused suspicions among parents or relatives. Mothers are often the main people involved in the care of victims because they are closer and more accessible to the children. In Africa, beyond the scope of sexual abuse, women are generally at the forefront of childcare procedures. This is because fathers are often busy meeting the family's needs (particularly financial ones). This presence of women may also be explained by the fact that the issue of sexual abuse is sensitive and may be difficult to discuss with the father. Additionally, women may be better able to understand girls (who are the predominant victims of sexual abuse). According to the mothers of these victims, their presence throughout the support process is crucial. The more emotional support victims receive from their mothers in response to the occurrence of sexual abuse, the less they feel the consequences [7].

Some highly emotional parents accuse their children of having deserved or sought, through some act of sexual provocation, the abuse they have suffered. This situation is very common in families where parents conflict with their children and parent-child dialogue is not established. The reasons for these conflicts include poor management of the adolescent crisis, parents' lack of information themselves (regarding sex education, gender-based violence in general, positive masculinity, and others), and the psychological wounds that each parent carries related to their historical past. Furthermore, some authors have concluded that mothers' history of sexual assault interferes with their ability to deal with the sexual abuse suffered by their children. Because the situation triggers memories of past assaults [8]. Relatives of some parents undertake to dissuade them from reporting and bringing the matter to justice. These mediation practices are still current and not only prevent victims from receiving proper care but also leave perpetrators unpunished, giving them the opportunity to reoffend other children [9]. However, there are mechanisms for recourse and reporting that are implemented and facilitated by social workers and community advocates.

Social workers and parents of children judge these mechanisms and strategies to be ineffective. The most obvious reasons are the insufficient level of mastery of the issue of sexual violence against minors in Benin by social workers and the weak coordination of all interventions carried out by different structures on the ground, each according to its own action plan. Also, all these interventions involve few local elected officials, community advocates, women's groups, youth associations, parents of children and other community mechanisms in the planning and implementation of these interventions. Most of these interventions focus their actions on the children and teenagers but neglect the family, the environment, and the psychosocial aspects that guarantee their effectiveness and success.

The poor communication between parents and their

children about sexual education and sexual abuse, as well as their insufficient knowledge in this area, limit the effectiveness of various interventions. Indeed, parents represent an important pillar in children's lives and significantly influence their actions. The surveyed parents were themselves in need of information and tools necessary to effectively protect their children against the abuse. They feel powerless and incapable of providing strong support to their children in need. Thus, in many cases, parents discuss little about issues related to sexual abuse with their children because they lack necessary information. They are held back by fear of social implications if they communicate poorly with their children, given the difference in language between parents and children.

Furthermore, NGOs and government structures targeting children or teenagers, among others, address gender-based violence but include very little on the sexual and reproductive health aspects of teenagers and young people. Social workers operating in the surveyed areas also lack perfect mastery of sexual violence against minors, making it difficult for them to provide parents with accurate information, accompany them in violence prevention, and offer quality care to victims and their families.

5. Conclusions

The study aimed, among other things, to assess the level of knowledge of parents of children and professionals in charge of children who are victims of sexual abuse. The notions of sexual abuse are variously mastered. Thus, most parents of children who are victims of sexual abuse or not had insufficient knowledge, and social workers had a weak mastery of the role assigned to them in the fight against sexual violence against minors.

This study also highlighted some social aspects among victims of sexual abuse. Indeed, these cases of abuse are often committed in conducive family conditions (precariousness and family disorganization) that make children vulnerable and parents unable to protect them. Thus, the factors that foster sexual violence against minors include poverty, promiscuity and celibacy (single parents).

Regarding the reaction of the surroundings to the occurrence of sexual abuse, the law of silence seems to be the first recourse. In some cases, victims are presented by their surroundings as being guilty of the abuse they have suffered.

The elaboration and implementation of an action plan to fight against sexual violence, placing parental education at the core of the theory of change and based on an adequate communication strategy, is therefore necessary at the national level, targeting the entire population, especially parents/tutors, social workers, children, teenagers, youth, and community child protection mechanisms.

This will have the effect of involving all sets of the

population in child protection, establishing a community monitoring system, early warning, and strengthening the response in the case of sexual violence against minors occurring in Benin.

Conflict of Interest

None

REFERENCES

- [1] Brookmeyer K A, Gladden M R, and Vagi KJ. "Violence against children in Tanzania: Findings from a national survey 2009". Multi Sector Task Force on Violence Against Children, UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/violence-against-children-tanzania-findings-national-survey-2009/> (2011).
- [2] Beail N and Warden S. "Sexual abuse of adults with learning disabilities". *J Intellect Disabil*, vol. 39, no. 5, pp. 382–387, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2788.1995.tb00542.x>.
- [3] Sy O, Fall L and Guèye M. "Sexual abuse to 'Kër Xaleyi': Socio-demographic aspects and context of interventions". *Neuropsychiatr l'enfance l'adolescence*, vol. 59, no. 5, pp. 305–313, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neurenf.2010.10.002>.
- [4] De Becker E. "Clinical situation and diagnostic reference marks of the sexually abused child". *J Pédiatrie puériculture*, vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 211–217, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpp.2006.06.003>.
- [5] Decker MR, Latimore AD, Yasutake S, Haviland M, Ahmed S and Blum R. "Gender-based violence against adolescent and young adult women in low- and middle-income countries". *J Adolesc Heal*, vol. 56, no. 2, pp. 188–196, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.09.003>.
- [6] Christine H, Christine S and France L. "Childhood sexual abuse among Kanak women in New Caledonia: lowering the tolerated-violence threshold". *Soc Sci Heal*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 5-32, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1684/sss.2010.0401>.
- [7] Thériault C, Cyr M and Wright J. "Contextual factors associated with symptoms of adolescent victims of intrafamilial sexual assault". *Child Abuse Negl*, vol. 27, no. 11, pp. 1291-1309, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2003.04.001>.
- [8] Collin-Vézina D and Cyr M. "The transmission of sexual violence description of the phenomenon and avenues for understanding". *Child Abuse Negl*, vol. 27, no. 5, pp. 489-507, 2003. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(03\)00038-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(03)00038-3).
- [9] Lopez G and Borstein S. "Clinical victimology". Maloine, édition unique, 27,rue de l'Ecole de Médecine 75006, Paris, France, <https://media.electre-ng.com/extraits/extrait-id/491410eccc1aafa483f6d1cf5f1f2e20b14e7ead0cb24f53464fbc50efc4e153.pdf> (1995).