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Ritualistic child sexual abuse in post-conflict Eastern DRC: Factors associated with the phenomenon and implications for social work

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ABSTRACT

Ritualistic child sexual abuse (RCSA) is a critical and under-recognised form of child maltreatment prevailing in developing countries. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), children from specific communities suffer complex forms of RCSA perpetrated with extreme brutality by various individuals and groups of conspirators. Although the DRC has achieved significant milestones towards combatting war-related sexual abuse of women and children, disturbing forms of RCSA, notably child kidnapping, rape, child defilement for fetish and superstitious beliefs, child sexual exploitation, and cult-based child marriage persist and affect many victims. This study examines the factors associated with the resurgence of RCSA in post-conflict eastern DRC. The article also discusses the implications of such forms of abuse for social work practice and education in a post-war context.

1. Ritualistic child sexual abuse in post-conflict settings

Child protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation is an immutable right embedded in social norms and legislations. According to Lachman et al. (2002), in the traditional African society, the extended family was involved in the rearing and protection of children, and the community played a stronger and more visible role to protect children from all forms of abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Accordingly, Ike and Twumasi-Ankrah (1999) argued that a child is the most treasured subject and constitutes the focal point of life. In the African traditional value system, some people view life without a child as meaningless and would do anything to have a child, even if it means marrying additional women or consulting traditional healers to facilitate the process of getting a child. Therefore, all adults are expected to endorse the responsibility of child-rearing, safety, and protection at the family and community levels, whether the child belongs to them or not.

The welfare of children around the world is undermined by extreme forms of assault and exploitation. Global evidence has indicated that approximately 150 million girls and 73 million boys under the age of 18 have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual assault including physical contact (ECSA-HC, 2011). In sub-Saharan Africa, ritualistic child sexual abuse (RCSA), notably, ritualistic defloration, child kidnapping associated with sexual assault, and child marriage, is a particularly significant social problem. In South Africa for example, the concept “*Ukuthwala*” is widely used to denote the practice of a young man, often with third-party assistance, kidnapping a girl for sexual assault or child marriage (Michalski, 2016). Likewise, in West Africa, especially in Ghana and Togo, the practice named “*Trokosi*” involves kidnapping and fetish practices in which virgin girls, as young as 10 years old, are sent to fetish shrines as slaves to atone for the sins and crimes committed by their relatives, who usually were already dead, are also highly prevalent (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2008). Similar retrospective studies have observed that 46.1% of all

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reported rape cases involving children from 1998 to 2003 occurred in Congo-Brazzaville as well as other critical forms of child sexual assault, including kidnapping and enslavement in other West African countries such as Senegal and Ivory Coast, (ECSA-HC, 2011).

In the DRC, children from specific communities are more likely to be kidnapped and assaulted or sacrificed for magical and religious practices (Heal Africa, 2012; UNICEF, 2014 and Maclean, 2016). The DRC is described as one of the most challenging environments for children's welfare and safety¹, especially those living in conflict-affected areas (Save the children, 2013 and UNICEF, 2014). In the eastern DRC, of the 13,681 victims of sexual violence documented at Panzi Hospital from January 2008 to December 2015, nearly 3014 (22%) victims were children, and 522 (17.3%) were younger than 10 years old (Panzi Hospital, 2016). In South Kivu province, as many as 82 cases of sexual violence against girls aged younger than 10 years were reported in 2014 by the Panzi Hospital: 29 (35%) of these children were from Kavumu, a semi-urban city located 33 km from Bukavu, a town in Zaire, and 53 (65%) were from the other territories of this province (Panzi Hospital, 2014). Similarly, Maclean (2016) reported 49 children younger than 10 years old and one who was 18 months old were abducted and systematically raped at night in specific communities of South Kivu in 2015. In addition, more and younger children have been observed to be victimised, and there are critical consequences associated with child sexual abuse in the short and long terms (ECSA-HC, 2011; African Child Policy Forum [ACPF], 2014). In summary, post-conflict eastern DRC has a problem: RCSA. Despite the DRC's Constitution (2006) and many national² and international legislations insist on protecting children from any form of abuse, exploitation and neglect, significant forms of RCSA at the family and community level still exist and receive little or no institutional assistance.

This article examines the factors associated with RCSA in post-conflict eastern DRC. The analysed factors include magical practices and superstitious beliefs, socioeconomic factors, political factors, and developmental factors.

2. Theoretical framework

The variables in this study were examined in the context of behavioural theory and the ecological perspective.

The behavioural theory explains RCSA as a socially learned condition. Drawing from the theoretical model of sexually deviant behaviour (Laws & Marshall, 1990), such deviant interests may be learned through the same mechanisms as conventional sexuality. This learning process involves three crucial conditioning principles: acquisition processes, social learning influences, and maintenance processes (Karen & Jennifer, 2004). The acquisition process requires six basic conditioning principles: Pavlovian conditioning, operant conditioning, extinction conditioning, punishment conditioning, differential consequences, and chaining of behaviour. The social learning influences require the General Social Learning Influences and Self-Labeling Influences.³ The maintenance of deviant sexuality requires a set of influences, including specific autoerotic influences, specific social learning influences, and intermittent reinforcement influences. Similarly, Felson and Lane (2009) argue that children who have been physically or sexually abused are more likely to commit violent offences as adults than children who have not been victimised, and the most common explanation for this reality involves modelling, because individuals learn, in part, by observing the behaviours of others. The authors also argue that vicarious learning is more likely when either the model or observer is rewarded but can also occur without favourable consequences. The child victim later becomes a perpetrator, resulting in the intergenerational transmission of violence. Concerning the specific aspects of sexual abuse often modelled by the abusers, Bandura (1978) argues that the behaviour modelled is often the same as the behaviour observed. Thus, individuals who have been physically abused should be more likely to engage in violent behaviour, whereas individuals who have been sexually abused should be more likely to engage in sexual offences.

This theory significantly associates RCSA with sexually deviant arousal and inappropriate sexual stimuli among the perpetrators. However, the behavioural theory might be limited by its generalisation of deviant sexual arousal to all sex offenders. Looman and Marshall (2005) argue that many male sex offenders lack deviant sexual arousal patterns or have arousal patterns similar to those of non-sex offenders. Further, other attributes, such as the lack of victim empathy, moral values, or remorse, may also play a role in the development of deviant sexuality; the behavioural theory as postulated here does not consider these variables.

The second theoretical perspective relevant to examining RCSA is the ecological perspective⁴. This perspective presents a set of behaviours, practices, attitudes, and beliefs that influence RCSA at the individual, relationship, community, and societal levels (Ayengo, 2009). Following Krug et al. (2002), individual factors, such as a child personal history of sexual abuse, witnessing violence, and attitudes that support sexual violence, are among the significant determinants of RCSA at the individual level among perpetrators. Association with sexually aggressive peers or family environments is also a key impetus of RCSA at the relationship or group level. Likewise, factors such as general tolerance of sexual assault, insufficient support from the police or judicial system, poverty, and weak community enforcement mechanisms may determine RCSA at the community level, whereas social problems, like gender imbalances, racial discrimination, religious and cultural beliefs, and economic and social policy issues may also determine increased risks of RCSA at the societal level. This perspective is relevant to this study because it increases the understanding of the interplay of factors contributing to RCSA at the individual, group, and community levels. However, although the ecological perspective provides a detailed discussion of the practices associated with RCSA at the different levels, it does not consider certain non-environmental

¹ Rape has been used systematically as a weapon of war, with more than 5,000 cases involving children reported in 2012 and countless more unreported. At the height of the war, as many as 30,000 children were believed to be fighting in one of DRC's many militias. (UNICEF, 2014)

² The child protection Act n° 09/001 enacted on 10th January 2009, the law on sexual violence, and the document of Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty, etc.

³ For more information on the Social Learning and Self-Labeling Influences see: Shoenberger et al., 2015, *Labeling, Social Learning, and Positive Deviance: A Look at High Achieving Students*, Journal of Deviant behaviour, Vol: 36 Issue, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2014.944066>

⁴ This was originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

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