

Community Cultural Practices and Their Impact in Fighting Child Sexual Assaults

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ABSTRACT: *Cultural practices significantly influence behaviors within communities, often conflicting with human rights and dignity, which social work aims to promote. This study was conducted in three districts of Arusha and involved 299 children aged 10-17 years from primary and secondary schools. The objective of this study was to assess the impact of community cultural practices on child sexual assault (CSA). Using a mixed-methods approach, the study revealed that traditional beliefs, witchcraft, and poor parenting skills contribute to the ongoing prevalence of CSA. The community tends to view sexual activity as normal and often responds to incidents in traditional ways, frequently concealing perpetrators. CSA cases are typically reported only if the victim suffers severe harm or if the incident comes to public attention, resulting in inadequate support for victims, including medical care. The findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive community sensitization to promote positive change. Child protection actors must collaborate effectively, providing essential resources, both financial and human, to increase child protection efforts. By addressing these cultural practices, the community can work toward reducing the rates of child sexual assault and ensuring that victims receive the support they need*

KEYWORDS: Cultural practice, child sexual assault, impact.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Global Overview of Child Sexual Assault

Child sexual assault (CSA) is a widespread violation of human rights and a significant public health issue. It takes away children's dignity, safety, and basic rights, with effects that last well beyond their childhood. Survivors often face posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse, and challenges with social relationships (Finkelhor, 2018). The impact is not just mental but also economic. Adults who experience CSA are more likely to struggle with finding work, leading to long-term productivity losses, higher healthcare costs, and ongoing poverty through generations (WHO, 2019). Global estimates show how serious this problem is. UNICEF (2016) reported that 120 million girls under 20 years of age, approximately one in ten, have faced forced sexual acts.

The OAK Foundation (2023) highlighted that one in five girls and one in thirteen

boys are sexually assaulted before they turn 18. These numbers cross borders and affect societies regardless of income, culture, or religion. Researchers believe that official statistics underestimate this issue because of underreporting, stigma, and fear of retaliation (Pereda et al., 2009). Child sexual assault can occur in many forms, from family abuse to large-scale organized exploitation. Child sex tourism is one of the most alarming aspects of global CSA. The World Tourism Organization estimates that three million people travel each year to exploit children, particularly in South America, Asia, and Africa (McCarney, 2022). This situation shows how poverty, inequality, and global demand work together to maintain exploitation. International human rights laws recognize CSA as both a legal matter and a public health concern. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that freedom from sexual exploitation is a basic right. However, enforcement varies widely.

Even countries with strong legal systems, such as those in Europe, deal with hidden abuse. Moreover, lower-income regions such as sub-Saharan Africa struggle with limited resources and cultural practices that normalize exploitation (Forbes, 2016). Solving the issue of child sexual assault requires coordinated efforts that bring together child protection laws, accessible social services, trauma-informed healthcare, and community involvement while also addressing global inequalities that leave children vulnerable. In Africa, child sexual assault is worsened by harmful traditional practices, poverty, weak institutional systems, and cultural attitudes that support silence. Child marriage is still one of the most common forms of CSA on the continent.

Despite both international and national laws against it, child marriage remains prevalent in countries such as Tanzania. In these situations, girls face sexual relations framed as marital or religious duties (UN, 2021). Other harmful practices include ritual cleansing and the belief that sex with virgins can cure HIV/AIDS or bring success myths that directly put children at risk (Shafe & Hutchinson, 2014). Cases of child abduction for ritual purposes, often involving sexual exploitation, have also surfaced (Bello, 2022). These customs blur the line between tradition and abuse, making outside intervention difficult. Silence also helps maintain child sexual assault. In many African societies, revealing abuse can lead to stigma, social exclusion, or disgrace for the family. Fontes and Plummer (2010) noted that victims and their families often keep quiet to protect their family's reputation. Research by Mlekwa et al. (2016) revealed that in Tanzania, parents often underestimate the risk of child sexual assault. When incidents occur, some families choose informal solutions or compensation instead of reporting to authorities. This protects offenders and allows abuse to continue. Legal and institutional frameworks exist but face major challenges in implementation. Tanzania has aligned itself with global standards through policies such as the National Child Development and Protection Policy (URT, 2013) and the National Plan of Action to End Violence against Women and Children (URT, 2016).

Regional laws such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) also stress the importance of protection. However, reports from the Legal and Human Rights Centre (2019) and Mogoatlhe (2019) reveal that child sexual assault cases are increasing in Tanzania, highlighting problems with enforcement, a lack of training for law enforcement, insufficient resources, and delays in the court system. Additionally, cultural acceptance of practices such as child marriage often weakens formal protection, creating a gap between laws and the realities faced by communities.

2.3. Literature Review

Scholars and practitioners highlight the complex interaction of cultural practices, secrecy, weak institutions, and global inequalities in enabling child sexual assault (CSA). The evidence shows that no single factor explains the ongoing prevalence of child sexual assault. Instead, a mix of deeply ingrained cultural norms, social stigmas, weak legal enforcement, and new technological vulnerabilities contributes to an environment where abuse can occur and often goes unreported. Understanding these overlapping factors is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. Research consistently indicates that harmful cultural traditions often normalize child sexual assault. Child marriage, for example, is still widely practiced in many parts of the world under the idea of protecting girls' honor and family reputation. However, it exposes minors to statutory rape and long-term psychological trauma (UN, 2021).

In addition to child marriage, other culturally accepted practices also contribute to child sexual assault. Ritual cleansing ceremonies, witchcraft myths, and beliefs in virginity-related cures reportedly perpetuate sexual abuse under the guise of traditional or religious duties (Shafe & Hutchinson, 2014). Bello (2022) further documents cases of child abduction for ritual exploitation, showing how cultural beliefs can justify extreme violence. Communities often defend such practices as vital parts of their cultural identity, resulting in resistance to external

interventions, which they frame as cultural imperialism. This resistance makes it harder to implement policies meant to protect children, as local populations may respond with suspicion or hostility. Secrecy and the prioritization of family honor also significantly block the reporting and prosecution of child sexual assault. Many families prefer private settlements or financial compensation over legal actions, fearing social stigma, damage to their reputation, or community exclusion (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Mlekwa et al., 2016).

This secrecy protects perpetrators, reinforces impunity, and weakens formal justice systems. Abour (2020) noted that marginalized or vulnerable groups face extra challenges in reporting abuse, including fears of disbelief, discrimination, or further victimization. In some Tanzanian communities, sexual relations with minors are not always condemned. James (2021) noted that survivors might not even see themselves as victims and that perpetrators may not be viewed as offenders. This normalization of child sexual assault comes from cultural beliefs that clash with international definitions of sexual abuse, revealing a significant gap between local and global understandings of child protection. Theoretical frameworks help explain why child sexual assault continues in these contexts. Social disorganization theory suggests that communities without shared moral beliefs, strong social ties, or effective informal control are less able to manage deviant behavior (Chukwu, 2019). In such settings, child sexual assault is more likely to be tolerated, hidden, or dealt with informally rather than reported. Even when legal frameworks exist, enforcement often falls short. The Tanzanian government has made progress in adopting child protection policies and laws. However, practical implementation remains inconsistent, and victims often have limited access to necessary medical, psychological, and legal support (LHRC, 2019; Mogoatlhe, 2019). Deeply rooted cultural practices continue to undermine formal laws, highlighting the need to combine legal reforms with cultural change initiatives and community engagement programs.

Recent studies have also revealed new aspects

of child sexual assault, especially concerning digital media. Children increasingly face online grooming, sexualized content, and the spread of illicit videos, both within Tanzania and globally (Levine, 2022). Despite the growing evidence of these risks, many communities underestimate the dangers presented by digital platforms. The literature on online grooming outlines manipulative tactics used by perpetrators, including gifts, rides, attention, and other forms of enticement (Victoria Government, 2019; Lehmann, 2012).

These new technological threats add complexity to child sexual assault, requiring interventions that address both offline cultural and institutional issues and online dangers. Overall, the literature indicates that child sexual assault persists due to a combination of entrenched cultural norms, secrecy and stigma, weak enforcement by institutions, and emerging technological threats. Addressing this widespread issue requires interventions that are culturally aware, community driven, and multilevel in scope. These should combine legal enforcement, social mobilization, educational programs, and digital safety measures. By addressing these interconnected factors, it is possible to make meaningful progress in reducing child sexual assault.

3. Methodology

This study explored how community cultural practices affect efforts to prevent and address child sexual assault (CSA) in the Arusha Region of Tanzania. The selection of Arusha was driven by its high rates of child sexual abuse compared with other areas, such as Arusha (808), Tanga (691), Shinyanga (505), Mwanza (500), and Ilala from Dar es Salaam (489) (LHRC, 2023; Wazambi, 2021). Given that child sexual assault is a complex social issue influenced by various factors, this study uses a practical approach that combines positive and interpretive perspectives. The positivist approach helps measure observable phenomena and analyze statistics related to child sexual assault rates among children. Moreover, the interpretive perspective provided a deeper

understanding of the cultural and social contexts that shape community responses to child sexual assault. The study followed social ecological theory, which highlights that child sexual assault is affected by interactions at different levels: individual, family, community, and societal.

This complexity calls for a layered approach in research design and analysis. The study utilized a cross-sectional research design, gathering data at one point in time to capture a snapshot of child sexual assault experiences and community practices in the Arusha Region. A mixed-methods approach was used, blending quantitative and qualitative techniques to produce numerical data and contextual insights. Researchers have gathered quantitative data through structured surveys given to children aged 10 to 17. The survey was designed to measure the prevalence, types, and perceived causes of child sexual assault, along with children's awareness of protective measures. A total of 400 children were approached, and 299 provided valid responses, resulting in a response rate of 74.75%. This high response rate improved the reliability and representativeness of the findings. Qualitative data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). The FGDs included parents, elders, and other community members who act as cultural protectors, offering insights into traditional practices, social norms, and shared attitudes toward child sexual assault. KIIs involved teachers, healthcare workers, law enforcement officers, and community leaders, who provided expert and policy-oriented views on preventing and addressing child sexual assault. A purposive sampling strategy ensured diverse representations, with 90 individuals selected to reflect various viewpoints and expertise related to cultural and institutional aspects of child sexual assault.

This careful selection of participants helped enhance the depth and credibility of the study findings. The data were sourced from multiple places to strengthen validity and thoroughness. This included survey responses from children;

transcripts from FGDs and KIIs; and secondary records from police departments, courts, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and published literature. The quantitative data were analyzed via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), which employs descriptive statistics to summarize patterns, correlation analysis to look at relationships between variables, and logistic regression to identify predictors of child sexual assault risk. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed with QDA Miner Lite software by coding transcripts, identifying recurring themes, and developing concepts related to harmful and protective cultural practices, gender norms, stigma, and community support. To ensure reliability and validity, several steps were taken. The survey instruments were pretested, and the experts reviewed them to refine the questions and enhance their clarity. Standard data collection protocols were consistently followed for all participants. The mixing of quantitative and qualitative data also helped build confidence in the findings by cross-confirming evidence from different sources.

Ethical standards were strictly maintained. Before data collection, clearance data were obtained from the Open University of Tanzania. Formal permission was then sought from the Arusha Regional Administrative Secretary and the District Executive Directors. Informed consent was secured from all participants through the District Education Directors, Ward Education Coordinators, and school management, whereby every school has a child protection focal person. Therefore, confidentiality and protective measures were put in place to shield participants, especially children, from potential distress or harm during the study. This research design, which combines various perspectives, data sources, and analytical methods, allowed for a thorough exploration of how cultural practices interact with child sexual assault prevention in the Arusha Region. It provides statistical generalizations of patterns and an in-depth understanding of local dynamics, resulting in strong evidence that can guide culturally sensitive interventions and policy decisions.

4. Results

4.1. Distribution of respondents

The distribution of respondents by age and sex is detailed in Table 4.1.

The study involved respondents from different districts, schools, and sexes. Overall, 52.2% were girls, and 47.8% were boys. A total of 32.4% of the respondents were from primary schools, whereas 67.6% were from secondary schools. Compared with Meru (22.8%) and Karatu (14.7%) District Councils, the Arusha City Council accounted for the highest proportion of respondents (62.5%), reflecting the population distribution in these areas. Additionally, the findings of the study on the influence of community cultural practices on child sexual assault are shown in Table 4.2.

The findings presented in Table 4.2 reveal that 39.1% of the respondents attributed child sexual assault (CSA) to the fear of contracting venereal diseases from adults. A total of 20.1% pointed

out witchcraft, 16.4% mentioned abduction and social capital, and 15.7% identified cleansing rituals. Media exposure was reported by 7.4% of the respondents, whereas 1.3% linked CSA to the perceived prestige of assaulting a virgin.

In addition, logistic regression revealed the relationships between sex, age, child social status and years spent in schooling and the increase or decrease in CSA. The detailed findings are provided in Table 4.3.

The logistic regression analysis in Table 4.3 revealed that age ($p = 0.043$), child social status ($p < 0.001$), and years of schooling ($p = 0.005$) were statistically significant predictors of CSA. In contrast, sex was not a significant factor.

Furthermore, the findings of the study focused on community response to child sexual assault, as shown in Figure 4.1.

The illustration in Figure 4.1 shows that 48% of the respondents indicated that CSA cases are

Table 4.1. Distribution of respondents

Age	Sex	
	Girls	Boys
10	11	9
11	15	11
12	14	12
13	13	12
14	23	20
15	31	29
16	30	28
17	19	22

Source: Research Findings 2022

Table 4.2. Distribution of socio-cultural practices of CSA among respondents (n=299)

Response	Percentage
Abduction and social capital	16.4
Cleansing	15.7
Witchcrafts	20.1
Use of media	7.4
Fear of contracting VDs from adults	39.1
Prestige of assaulting a virgin	1.3
Total	100.0

Source: Research Findings 2022

Table 4.3. Logistic Regression Model Results on Determinants of Increases in CSA

	Variable	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp (B)
Step 1a	Sex	.179	.244	.539	.463	1.196
	Age	-.202	.100	4.093	.043	.817
	CSS	-1.269	.324	15.369	.000	3.557
	Years in Sch.	-.240	.086	7.830	.005	1.272
	Constant	-.374	.957	.152	.696	.688

a. Variable(s) entered step 1: S, A, CSS, Years in Sch.

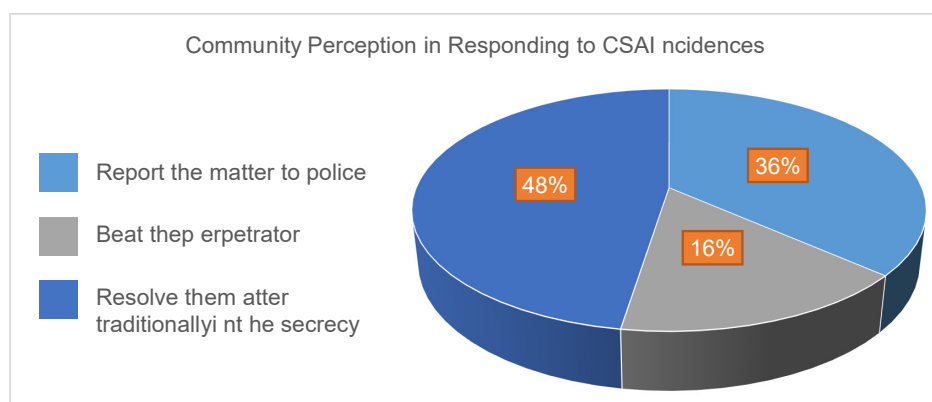


Figure 4.1. Distribution of Community Perception in Responding to CSA Incidents

resolved traditionally and in secrecy. Moreover, 36% reported incidents to the police, and 16% indicated that perpetrators were punished through community judgment, often by beating. Qualitative interviews further revealed that CSA cases are rarely reported unless the child is severely injured or the case becomes widely known.

“Norms and traditions of using grass to settle critical issues are a barrier to the effort initiated to end violence against children. For example, a perpetrator can be arrested, but parents meet and request solving the matter at home. The survivor can be taught to defend the perpetrator that the person who committed the incident is a stranger whom they have just met at the marketplace. Additionally, the community believes that someone who commits sex with another has become a relative because they have mixed blood” (Research participant, 5th April 2022).

Furthermore, the findings concerning community support for children who are victims of CSA are based on traditional morals, as displayed in Figure 4.2.

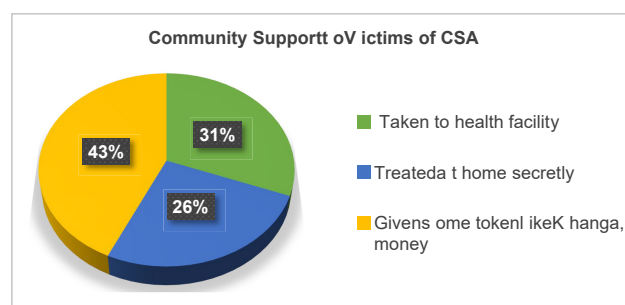


Figure 4.2. Distribution of Community Support to Victims of CSA among Respondents

The responses concerning support for CSA survivors shown in Figure 4.3 indicated that 43% of victims received compensation such as money or cloth. Approximately 31% reported that survivors were taken to health facilities, whereas 26% reported that treatment occurred at home, usually in secrecy. According to King (2018), in some contexts, girls undergo FGM to prepare them for marriage... there is a social belief that uncut girls make unsuitable wives. Additionally, different beliefs and rituals prevail across Tanzania, which play out divergent roles in marriage patterns, including cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (UNFPA, 2017). The findings of this study revealed that traditional practices, such as rituals and female genital mutilation, often lead to early marriage. The reasons for kidnapping are illustrated in Figure 4.3 below.

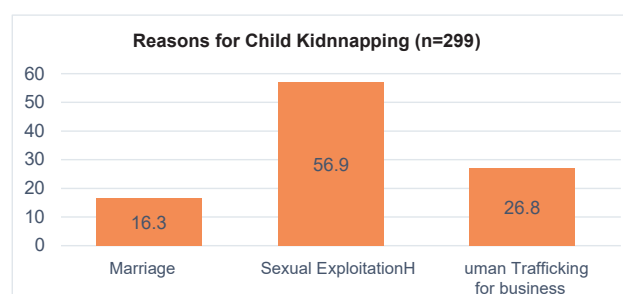


Figure 4.3. Distribution of Reasons for Child Kidnapping among Respondents

The findings in Figure 4.3 show that 56.9% of the respondents indicated sexual exploitation as the main motive for child kidnapping. A total of 26.8% reported human trafficking, and 16.3% mentioned abduction for marriage.

Table 4.4. Perception of socio-cultural practices regarding increases in CSA

Category	Codes	Count	% codes	cases	% cases
Socio-cultural practices	Fear of retaliation	2	0.6	2	11.1
	Traditional beliefs	7	2.1	5	27.8
	Use of television	2	0.6	1	5.6
	Loss of moral decay	7	2.1	4	22.2
	Poor parenting skills	3	0.9	3	16.7
	Cultural beliefs	7	2.1	5	27.8

Source: Research findings 2022

Moreover, the study revealed the impact of illicit video on child sexual assault, and the findings revealed that a majority (81.9%) of the respondents agreed that illicit videos in the community contributed to CSA, whereas 18.1% disagreed. The respondents noted that video play stations expose children to sexualized environments that increase their vulnerability to abuse. In addition, a summary of coded opinions from in-depth interviews demonstrated community cultural practices in detail.

Other Factors Influencing the Increase in CSA

The study also revealed that 43.8% of the respondents believed that gifts, lifts, or accompanying adults increased the risk of CSA, whereas 56.2% disagreed. This suggests that such grooming behaviors may not always be recognized as threats, despite evidence of their role in exploitation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the ongoing impact of sociocultural practices in sustaining child sexual assault (CSA) in the communities examined. Cultural beliefs, rituals, and traditional practices enable abuse both directly and indirectly, creating environments where children, especially girls, are vulnerable. Key practices include beliefs related to witchcraft, cleansing rituals, and fears surrounding disease transmission. These often normalize harmful behavior and lend implicit legitimacy to acts of abuse. Such cultural frameworks reinforce

silence and stigma around child sexual assault, fostering a social context in which abuse can go unchallenged. Previous studies (James, 2021; Shafe & Hutchinson, 2014) have indicated that entrenched cultural norms often serve as significant barriers to reporting, hindering effective interventions and complicating the enforcement of legal protections for children. Community responses to child sexual assault in these areas show a clear preference for secrecy and informal resolution instead of formal legal procedures.

This preference is evident in the high number of respondents who indicated that cases of child sexual assault are handled privately, often through compensation, such as money or clothes, to victims. While these practices are meant to restore social harmony or provide restitution, they also allow perpetrators to escape justice and undermine child protection structures. By favoring informal resolution over legal accountability, these cultural practices inadvertently perpetuate cycles of abuse and silence, deepening gendered vulnerabilities and systemic impunity. Similar trends are noted by other researchers, where traditional and cultural norms dominate over formal justice systems (UN, 2021; Masters, 2018). In these settings, the focus on secrecy and compensation demonstrates community complicity, reinforcing norms that protect perpetrators while marginalizing victims.

This complicity is troubling because it not only hinders child protection efforts but also indicates societal tolerance for abusive behavior.

The reliance on informal dispute resolution and material compensation reveals a tension between customary practices and formal child protection methods, highlighting the challenges of merging culturally sensitive approaches with legal imperatives and child rights. The study also revealed that support systems for victims of child sexual assault are often inconsistent, inadequate, and influenced more by social and cultural norms than by professional or medical guidelines. Some victims received care at health facilities, but many were treated at home by family members, neighbors, or traditional healers. Although home care is culturally acceptable, it poses significant risks to children's physical and emotional health. It also hinders the collection of critical medical and forensic evidence needed for prosecution, limiting authorities' ability to hold offenders accountable. Instead of comprehensive protection, offering material compensation points to broader cultural and systemic barriers to effective child safeguarding. There is a need for interventions that address deeper normative issues rather than superficial remedies. Certain harmful cultural practices identified in this study, such as kidnapping, abduction, early marriage, ritualistic practices, and female genital mutilation, are linked to greater vulnerability to child sexual assault. These practices highlight the connection between traditional norms and criminal behavior, showing how specific sociocultural frameworks can indirectly endorse abuse.

These findings align with the findings of Ibrahim(2017)andBello(2022),who documented how sexual exploitation and forced marriage serve as major factors driving child abduction and exploitation. The overlap of cultural and criminal practices underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that target harmful social norms, increase community awareness, and strengthen the enforcement of legal protections for children. Failure to address these interlinked factors risks leaving interventions superficial or ineffective. An important aspect of child sexual assault revealed by this study is the role of digital media in facilitating such abuse. The respondents noted that children are increasingly

exposed to sexualized content through illegal videos and video game stations, which may lead to risky behavior and a greater likelihood of exploitation. This finding aligns with that of Levine (2022), who highlighted the growing use of online platforms for the grooming and sexual exploitation of minors.

Additionally, many community members do not recognize grooming behaviors such as offering gifts, rides, or special attention as warning signs of abuse. This lack of awareness is concerning since the literature (Victoria Government, 2019; Lehmann, 2012) emphasizes these behaviors as key indicators of predatory conduct. Therefore, there is a crucial need for awareness campaigns and educational efforts that highlight both overt and subtle tactics used by perpetrators in online and physical spaces. Overall, these findings show that cultural perceptions and practices are significant barriers to preventing and responding to child sexual assault. The widespread reliance on secrecy, traditional dispute resolution, and material compensation serves multiple purposes: silencing victims, reinforcing stigma, and inadvertently encouraging perpetrators by signaling a low risk of legal consequences.

6. Limitations

This study provides important insights into the social and cultural aspects of child sexual assault, but it has several limitations. Firstly, relying on self-reported data poses challenges. The participants might minimize their experiences or feelings due to fear of retaliation, stigma, or shame related to discussing sexual abuse. Some may adjust their answers to match what they think researchers expect, leading to social desirability bias. This issue is especially apparent in sensitive topics such as sexual violence, where revealing personal experiences can carry risks for both individuals and their communities. Therefore, the actual prevalence of child sexual assault and the impact of cultural practices may be underestimated. Secondly, the study focused on particular communities, which raises questions about how generalisable the findings are. Cultural practices, traditions,

and social norms vary widely across and within regions and are influenced by ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic factors. For example, while some communities may prioritize secrecy and financial compensation, others may depend more on formal legal systems to handle child sexual assault. Because of these differences, caution is needed when applying the findings to broader populations. Although the localized approach offers depth, it limits the applicability of the findings in other settings. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design limits conclusions about causality. Although the study revealed connections between cultural practices and child sexual assault incidents, it is unclear whether these factors directly increase risk or simply coexist with other influences, such as poverty, limited education, or weak legal enforcement. Cross-sectional data provide only a snapshot of a specific time, which makes it impossible to analyze how cultural practices change or impact victims' long-term outcomes. This limitation makes it challenging for policymakers and practitioners to create interventions that address root causes rather than just surface-level connections. Together, these limitations highlight the need for careful interpretation. While the study provides a foundation, its findings require additional support to inform culturally informed interventions.

7. Future Research

Despite these limitations, this study suggests several directions for further research. Firstly, longitudinal studies are necessary to assess the long-term effects of cultural practices on child sexual assault. Such research could track how norms, traditions, and responses change over time and how they shape victims' health, well-being, and legal outcomes throughout their lives. Secondly, future studies should evaluate interventions tailored to specific cultures. Programs such as community-based education, participatory social work models, and advocacy campaigns show promise, but their success relies on balancing respect for cultural values with challenging harmful norms. Comparative studies

across regions could highlight strategies best suited for particular cultural settings, avoiding "one-size-fits-all" approaches that could alienate communities or overlook core issues. Thirdly, the increasing use of digital media needs closer examination. Online spaces, including social media, gaming platforms, and messaging apps, are often misused by offenders. These platforms can also reinforce stigma and victim-blaming attitudes. Research should investigate how digital environments interact with cultural practices and find ways to ensure safe technology use in different contexts. Fourthly, more attention should be given to how traditional practices connect with formal legal systems. In many communities, material compensation, secrecy, or traditional dispute resolution coexist with national laws and international child protection standards. Understanding these intersections is crucial for developing combined approaches that respect cultural contexts while upholding children's rights. For example, hybrid justice models could reduce impunity while building community trust. Finally, a multidisciplinary approach is vital. Insights from law, anthropology, psychology, and digital studies can provide a richer understanding of how cultural, structural, and technological factors contribute to abuse. This collaboration can also lead to innovative solutions that merge legal reforms with cultural dialog, digital safety measures, and psychosocial support. In summary, by conducting longitudinal research, testing culturally sensitive interventions, addressing digital risk, and examining the combination of customary and formal systems, future research can provide the evidence needed to break cycles of silence and impunity.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

8.1. Conclusion

This study emphasizes the vital role of socio-cultural practices in the ongoing issue of child sexual assault (CSA) within the communities we investigated. Our key findings indicate that deeply ingrained cultural beliefs surrounding witchcraft, cleansing rituals, and the normalization of secrecy significantly

contribute to legitimizing abuse. These practices not only create barriers to reporting child sexual assault but also perpetuate a culture of silence and stigma that empowers perpetrators and isolates victims. The persistence of such beliefs fosters an environment where children are particularly vulnerable, as community members may prioritize preserving social reputation or adhering to tradition over safeguarding children's rights and well-being.

The application of ecological systems theory has provided valuable insights into the multilayered nature of child sexual assault, highlighting how individual behaviors are shaped by community norms and broader societal influences. At the microsystem level, family and immediate social networks may normalize harmful practices or discourage disclosure. At the mesosystem and exosystem levels, community attitudes toward traditional rituals and informal dispute resolution mechanisms further inhibit reporting and accountability. At the macrosystem level, cultural narratives about witchcraft, cleansing, and child-rearing intersect with legal and institutional shortcomings, creating a complex web that allows child sexual assault to persist largely unchecked.

The preference for informal, traditional dispute resolution over formal legal mechanisms further complicates the situation. Communities often prioritize reconciliation or ritual-based remedies, which can lead to inadequate support for victims, minimal accountability for offenders, and the perpetuation of abuse across generations. This finding demonstrates that child sexual assault is not only a matter of individual criminal behavior but also a deeply embedded social problem reinforced by cultural practices and systemic gaps.

The implications of these findings are profound. Interventions must be culturally sensitive and involve communities as active partners in redefining norms around child protection and human rights. Awareness campaigns should directly address harmful practices, educate community members about the signs and risks of grooming behaviors,

and promote safe reporting channels. Simultaneously, legal frameworks must be strengthened, and enforcement mechanisms must be enhanced to ensure that children are effectively protected and that perpetrators face appropriate consequences. Addressing child sexual assault, therefore, requires an integrated approach that combines cultural engagement, education, and robust legal action to dismantle the conditions that allow abuse to continue.

8.2. Recommendations

Prime Minister's Office

The Prime Minister's Office is in charge of overseeing the implementation of the National Plan of Action to End Violence against Women and Children (NPA-VAWC). It should enhance partnerships between institutions, incorporate child protection into broader development initiatives, and create interagency task forces. Make sure that government policies reflect community voices through structured consultations and participatory planning. Create ways for communities to monitor and provide feedback that influences both local and national decision-making processes.

Ministries of Justice and Constitution

The legal system should consistently enforce child protection laws, ensure victim-centered justice, and hold offenders accountable with strict penalties. A database on child sexual assault should also be established.

Ministry of Community Development, Gender, Women and Special Groups

Community-led change can be promoted by encouraging local leaders, respected elders, and influential community members to take an active role in preventing harmful practices that affect children. Support the formation of community groups, such as women's associations, youth networks, and parent committees, which can enhance child well-being. Collaborate with other actors, such as NGOs, religious leaders, teachers, and cultural figures, to deliver education and communication campaigns that reflect community values and traditions.

Ministry of Health

The Ministry of Health should train healthcare providers in the response to child sexual assault, incorporate child protection into health programs, and offer counseling and trauma-informed services.

Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education should integrate child rights and safety into curricula, create peer-to-peer education programs, and raise awareness about digital safety. Awareness and education should be strengthened through trusted channels.

Universities and Research Institutions

Universities and research institutions should conduct long-term, comparative, and participatory research studies while evaluating awareness campaigns.

Civil Society Organizations

Frontline interventionists, like civil society workers, should use locally relevant methods, such as storytelling, community theater, radio, and dialog forums, to share child protection messages in familiar and trusted ways. Encourage positive alternatives and incentives and offer recognition and public acknowledgment to communities that successfully reduce harmful practices. Support such as scholarships, livelihoods, or small grants should be provided to families and communities that adopt child-friendly practices but face economic challenges. The approach from external enforcement to community ownership, where local actors help create change, should be changed. Local capacity should be built so that communities can become long-term caretakers of child protection and well-being.

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