

# Socio-cultural barriers to child sexual abuse investigation in Uganda: Experiences of police officers at Kamuli District central police station

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## Abstract

Child sexual abuse has been widely recognised as a global crisis and a violation of fundamental rights of children. Irrespective of this recognition, child sexual abuse remains pervasive, underreported and poorly investigated. This paper forms part of a qualitative case study that aimed at establishing challenges faced by police officers in investigating cases of child sexual abuse in Kamuli District, Eastern Uganda. The study utilised purposive sampling to select 14 police officers from three departments of Kamuli District central police station which included; Criminal Investigation Department, Child and Family Protection Unit and Sexual Gender-Based Violence Department. Data collection was conducted using face-to-face in-depth interviews. The instruments of data collection were the semi-structured interview guides while data analysis was done using thematic analysis. One of the major themes that were generated through interviews with police officers included the socio-cultural factors that hinder them from investigating child sexual abuse. Discussed in this paper are these factors, which include; failure and delayed disclosure of abuse/abusers, ignorance, community beliefs, inadequate cooperation from parents and guardians, and taboos regarding discussion of sex in public. Apart from reflecting limited education and awareness about the impact of child sexual abuse, these challenges show that in Uganda, child sexual abuse is taken as a private matter which should be settled informally between the perpetrators and victims' families. The findings of this study make a contribution to limited research about child sexual abuse in Uganda and to the policy-making and practice on crimes of the kind.

**Keywords:** *child sexual abuse, socio-cultural factors, police officers, Kamuli District, Uganda*

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## 1. Introduction

Child Sexual abuse (CSA) abuse has been acknowledged as a global crisis. The abuse takes different forms that include, but are not limited to, child prostitution, sexual assault, attempted rape, genital touching, practical sexual activity and exposing children to adult sexual activities (Almuneef, 2021). The perpetrators are, usually, in homes, communities, schools and online (UNICEF, 2024). In particular, CSA has been reported to be prevalent in most countries. In fact, a report by UNICEF (2024) indicates that 90 million children have been subjected to sexual violence. The report further shows that 650 million women and girls living today experienced sexual violence during childhood and these include 370 who were subjected to either rape or sexual assault. More so, between 410 and 530 men and boys living today were subjected to sexual violence during childhood and up to 310 were either raped or sexually assaulted (UNICEF, 2024).

According to World Health Organisation (1999), CSA takes place when a person below 18 years is forced into sexual acts, he/she cannot comprehend and comply with. It should, however, be noted that girls are more likely to be subjected to sexual violence than boys. In one study, it was found that globally, CSA prevalence rate was 18.0 % and 7.6 % for girls and boys, respectively (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). It has been documented that as compared to developed countries, the prevalence rate of CSA is higher in developing countries. For example, a national study in schools found that whereas 22% of girls in Switzerland were subjected to some form of sexual violence this percentage increased to 33.9% in South Africa (Ward et al., 2018). This proportionate burden of violence against children is partly attributed to the fact that 80% of the world's children live in low-and middle-income countries (UNICEF, 2019). Moreover, in allocating their social protection and health budgets, low-and middle-income countries have limited resources and are affected by, among other factors, inadequate infrastructure to reach affected children, conflicts and political violence (Kushitor & Boatemaa, 2018). Much as there is paucity of data in most African countries due to limited research (Badoe, 2017), it has been reported that the highest number of sexually abused children reside in Sub-Saharan Africa (Selengia et al., 2020). For example, in South Africa, the prevalence of CSA was reported to be 20% for girls aged 15-17 years (Burton et al., 2015). In Nigeria, it is estimated that by 18 years, 25% of girls are already victims of sexual abuse (Ifayomi et al., 2024).

In particular, Uganda has been reported, amongst the African countries, with higher rates of child abuse (Goessmann et al., 2020). The Uganda Demographic Health Survey (2006) reported that 55% of female survivors of sexual abuse experienced it before they were 19 years old. In Uganda, CSA, especially, defilement is shown to be increasing. According to the 2023 annual crime police report, there was a 1.5% increase in defilement cases from 12,580, which were reported in 2022 to 12,771 in 2023 and of these, 96% and 4% were female and male juveniles, respectively. The cases of sexual abuse in Uganda vary according to districts with Kamuli in Eastern part of the country being one of those districts with the highest numbers of sexual abuse. For example, the Daily Monitor (2017) reported that Kamuli District registered 2,051 cases of girls that had been defiled in the last five years. In 2020, it was also reported that Kamuli District topped the whole of Busoga Sub-Region in the numbers of children and women who were sexually abused during COVID-19 lockdown in Uganda (Daily Monitor, 2020).

Despite the several efforts geared towards addressing the negative effects of CSA, it remains widespread, poorly investigated and worst of all underreported by children, parents and communities. It is not until children start showing complications that most cases are reported and investigated (Allard-Gaudreau et al., 2024). This is especially so in developing countries like Uganda where the official statistics on CSA are far from the actual because of factors like stigma, lack of information on children's rights and other socio-cultural factors (Wismayanti et al., 2019). According to Ndhlovu and Mfoafo-M'Carthy (2022), in Africa, perpetrators of CSA are usually shielded from authorities and the long arm of the law because of the culture that promotes the interests of the certain groups, which is, usually, the case when the perpetrator has been in charge of the victim's welfare.

Research has documented challenges that police face in attempting to investigate cases of CSA. Some have reported economic factors like inadequate resources such as poverty, vehicles and equipment (Bishumba, 2020; Davenport & Mutisya, 2024; Kloess et al., 2021). In Kenya, it was found that instead of working hard to investigate and hold accountable perpetrators of CSA, police officers spent most of their time in personal work to get money for supplementing their low pay (Davenport & Mutisya, 2024). In Rwanda, it was reported that poverty forced the families of the victims to keep silent when the perpetrator was a bread winner (Bishumba, 2020). Others have reported the difficulties in producing evidence due to delay in reporting the cases of CSA. In Pakistan, Mkonyi et al. (2021) found that delay to get

forensic report resulted into lack of evidence which affected police's effort to investigate CSA. Other scholars have documented a number of socio-cultural factors that hinder police from investigating CSA such as; reluctance to disclose the abuse/abuser (Sumampouw et al., 2020), ignorance (Davenport & Mutisya, 2024), stigma and taboos that prevent public discussion of sex in public (Wangamati et al., 2019) and limited cooperation from victims and their families. In Kenya, it was found that the victims of CSA did not report the abuse because they lacked knowledge of abuse (Davenport & Mutisya, 2024). Sumampouw et al. (2020) reported that due the belief that CSA is a private matter, humiliating and shameful to the victims and their families, some cases of CSA are not reported and investigated.

Much as research exists elsewhere on what could be the factors that hinder police from investigating cases of CSA, in Uganda, such research is limited. This is irrespective of the fact that Uganda has not only been documented as one of the countries in Africa with the highest prevalence of CSA but, has also ratified different international conventions and instituted different national policies and regulations aimed at protecting children from being abused. Despite the efforts that the government of Uganda has undertaken to protect children from abuse, the efforts have not been successful (Manion & Jones, 2020). Apart from some cases of CSA going without being investigated and perpetrators not prosecuted (Michael, 2023), there has been inadequate policy implementation. Available research has suggested that the formal policy cannot succeed without an understanding of the grass root knowledge that is needed to guide its effort (Renzaho et al., 2018). This study, therefore, intends to fill this gap by investigating the possible socio-cultural factors that hinder police from investigating to conclusion CSA in Kamuli District. This paper is guided by four specific objectives that include (1) to investigate how the failure and delayed disclosure abuse/abuser hinder police from investigating CSA in Kamuli District, (2) to document how the ignorance of the victims and their families prevent police from investigating CSA in Kamuli District, (3) to establish how beliefs and taboos regarding the discussion of sex in public hinder police from investigating CSA in Kamuli District, and (4) to investigate how inadequate cooperation from parents and guardians acts a barrier to investigating CSA in Kamuli District.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Socio- Cultural Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse Investigation***

#### ***2.1.1 Failure and delayed disclosure of sexual abuse/abuser***

Under normal circumstances, a victim of sexual abuse should report her/his experience to either formal authorities like the police or informal authorities like family members (Ullman et al., 2020). However, non-disclosure has been documented as one of the socio-cultural barriers to investigating CSA. Research has shown that the majority of child victims of sexual abuse do not disclose abuse to family members, friends and authorities after it has occurred (London et al., 2008). Even with evidence such as that from medical personnel, a big percentage of children (43%) refuse to expose the abuse (Sjoberg & Lindblad, 2002). In one study, it was found that 35% of CSA was never disclosed when investigated by forensic officers (Azzopardi et al., 2019). Priebe and Svedin (2008) reported that up to 59.5% of CSA victims never disclosed until they were included in a research study. Moreover, amongst those who reported abuse, the majority were more likely to report to informal authorities than to formal authorities. Estimates by Stoltenborgh et al. (2011) show that informal sexual abuse reports were 30 times more than formal reports to police and other child protection services. Non-disclosure was also found to be more common when the perpetrator was a close person like a parent and relative than a stranger (London et al., 2005). According to Danaeifar et al. (2022), the tendency to hide sexual abuse is influenced by social factors like the taboos surrounding family and child's fear of social exclusion and fear of threats from the perpetrator.

#### ***2.1.2 Ignorance***

Limited information and awareness about forms of CSA has been documented as one of the barriers to investigating the abuse (Chadwick-Charuma et al., 2022). According to Davenport and Mutisya (2024), in most cases, parents and children have limited knowledge of some forms of CSA, appropriate actions to take and, either end up not reacting to them or making arbitrary responses to solving the problems with the perpetrators. Others have reported a lack of sex education, which subjects children to sexual abuse (Schneider & Hirsch, 2020). Some families also fail to observe the changes in the behaviour of victims of sexual abuse and ignore the symptoms, which delays adequate and appropriate responses (Chadwick-Charuma et al., 2022). Davenport and Mutisya (2024) found that in Kenya, victims of CSA lacked sufficient knowledge about the abuse and ended up not reporting to police.

### ***2.2.3 Community beliefs***

Studies have documented community beliefs like the need for family prestige and the fear that when girls lose virginity, they bring shame to the families as one of the factors that affect the investigation of CSA (Fontes, 2005). In order to avoid being judged and stigmatized by the community, which may ruin their reputation, some families choose to keep CSA a secret (Schomeru et al., 2021). For this reason, parents and guardians protect the perpetrator at the expense of the child victim of abuse (Sumampouw et al., 2020). Moreover, there are instances when the families of the victims do not want to engage in conflicts with the perpetrator's families and choose to keep harmony instead of reporting the perpetrator (Danaeifar et al., 2022). In some African countries, girls are under pressure to keep their virginity until marriage and this acts as a barrier to reporting CSA (Mkhize, 2006). Because of this belief, some victims and families decide not to report the abusers (Machisa, 2015).

### ***2.1.4 Inadequate cooperation from parents and guardians***

According to Hershkowitz et al. (2007), police will find it hard to ensure that victims of sexual abuse access justice without family cooperation. In some cases, victims and their families refuse to cooperate with police in providing information regarding abuse/abuser (Sumampouw et al., 2020). Parents and guardians have been reported either delaying or failing to report the abuse which hinders police from gathering enough evidence to hold the perpetrators accountable (Davenport & Mutisya, 2024). Failure to cooperate with police has been found to be common in cases when the perpetrator is a family member and more so a provider (Nidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Because families know that when the perpetrator is arrested and tried, they will lose a provider, they shield the perpetrator at the expense of victims of abuse (Artz & Ward, 2018). This leaves police with no or incomplete information to apprehend the perpetrators (Danaeifar et al., 2022).

### ***2.1.5 Taboos regarding discussion of sex in public***

According Khuzwayo-Magwaza (2021), societies hold taboos that are against the discussion of sex in public and, this results in negative attitudes towards victims of sexual abuse. This is most common in developing countries where societies have cultures that perceive discussion of sex in public as shameful and humiliating which translates into lack of awareness and education about CSA and, makes the victims fail to realise and report sexual

abuse (Sumampouw et al., 2020). Because of negative attitudes toward CSA, some parents and guardians fail to address the practice allowing it to continue happening to the child victims (Briere & Runtz, 1990). Victims of CSA can also be manipulated by the perpetrators of the heinous crimes in order for them to keep quiet because of such taboos (Hershkowitz et al., 2007). These sociocultural values take precedence over concerns about CSA and, families choose to promote their honour and prestige instead of protecting the children (Danaeifar et al., 2022).

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

This study utilised a qualitative research methodology to generate rich data in a context with limited research studies related to CSA. Qualitative research helps to understand and explain social reality in its natural context (Jervis & Drake, 2014) and to empower participants to share stories in a context where power relations between them and the researchers are minimized (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study used a case study design, valuable in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study in its natural occurrence (Crowe et al., 2011). According to Yin (2003), this design helps the researchers to answer the "why" and "how" parts of the questions and not manipulate the behaviour of study participants. It also applies to explaining, describing and exploring the phenomenon as it occurs in the daily context (Yin, 2003). This design was relevant in this study because it is widely applied in the social science discipline and it helped in capturing in-depth data from the participants.

#### ***3.2 Sampling Strategy***

Purposive sampling technique was used to select the site and participants for this study. As already noted, Kamuli District located in Eastern part of Uganda has been reported to be among the districts with the highest rates of CSA in Uganda. This is why it was purposively selected for this study. The study was conducted at Kamuli District Central Police Station (CPS) because it is the biggest station in the district and receives all the referral cases of abuse from all the police stations in the district. The participants for this study were 14 police officers from; (1) Criminal Investigation Department (CID), which responsible for investigating crime-related behaviours in Uganda, (2) The Child and Family Protection Unit (CFPU), which looks into all the issues related to children and their families, and (3), Sexual Gender-Based Violence

(SGBV) which handles all the issues related to all forms of violence. The selection criteria considered were; (1) police officers who were working in the criminal investigation department, (2) officers who directly dealt with family -related crimes, and (3) officers who were handling cases that involved abuse in SGBV department. All officers were formally educated. Three of them had bachelor's degree while others had a certificate of Uganda police obtained after high school.

### ***3.3. Sample Size***

The study included a purposive sample of 14 police officers from CFPU, SGBV and CID departments in Kamuli District CPS. In qualitative research, scholars recommend the idea of a saturation sample attained at a point when no new information is being collected (Fofana et al., 2020). This is, usually, a small sample but big enough to offer rich data. However, there are other proposals such as one by Morse (1994) who proposes 30-50 participants for ethnography and grounded theory studies and Creswell (2014) who proposes five to 25 for phenomenological studies. However, in a case study design, depending on the unit of analysis, a researcher may select single or multiple units depending on the research questions and epistemological ideas guiding research (Mills et al., 2019). According to Mills et al. (2009), a researcher whose aim is to gain more insight into the phenomenon under study and replicate findings, multiple cases can be selected until a saturation sample is attained. Nevertheless, there are rules that dictate the number of participants and some scholars recommend 4 to 50 participants in multiple case study design (Sarfo et al., 2021).

### ***3.4 Data Collection Methods and instruments***

The researchers utilised face-to-face in-depth interviews. These were useful in generating rich data, establishing rapport between the researchers and participants and creating an environment where the participants freely responded with their opinions (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The tools of data collection were key informants' guides. These were open-ended semi-structured questions without pre-determined responses that required the participants to express their opinions freely. These helped the researchers gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study by probing and asking questions not in a fixed manner (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews lasted for, at least, one hour. Scholars have confirmed 60 minutes to be favourable for researchers and participants (Guest et al., 2006). Interviews were audio-



recorded with the consent of study participants. The researchers also utilised secondary data which was collected from peer-reviewed journals, textbooks and other relevant documents like government reports to back up the literature review and background of the study. The data were validated and verified to ensure that it was consistent, accurate and complete. This was ensured through peer debriefing where by the researchers discussed data amongst themselves and shared with their colleagues to check any errors and biases.

### ***3.5 Data Analysis Strategy***

Thematic data analysis framework was utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To begin this process, the audio-recorded data were transcribed. Then transcripts were read and cleaned, and identified meaning units were coded through labelling. This process involved breaking down the data into meaningful segments and assigning descriptive codes to them (Bryman, 2016). In the initial coding, researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading and re-reading to develop an in-depth understanding and then labelled it with descriptive words. After, the initial coding, the researchers conducted a thematic analysis to further explore and interpret the identified themes. This stage involved organizing the coded data into overarching themes and sub-themes according to research questions (Creswell, 2014). The themes were refined through a process of constant comparison and discussion among researchers to ensure data accuracy.

### ***3.6 Ethical Considerations***

This study was approved by the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Population Studies at Kyambogo University, which provided a letter of introduction to the researcher to conduct the study. The research procedure involved getting approval from the research supervisor and getting an acceptance letter from the Department of Sociology and from the Police headquarters at Naguru, Kampala, Uganda. The Office of the District Police Commander (DPC) at Kamuli District CPS also cleared the study. The DPC helped the researcher to access participants within the police station by offering a clearance letter that introduced the researcher to the study participants. All the study participants provided written consent to participate in the study. In the consent form, researchers provided enough information that included among others; study objectives, risks and benefits, right to join and withdraw from the project and right to ask any question about the research. For example,

participants were assured that they can choose to withdraw from and re-join the study any time without any reprimand. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by not mentioning and disclosing names of the police officers.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Interviews with officers revealed that they usually receive reports about cases of CSA. According to the officers, among others, some of the forms of sexual abuse that are common in Kamuli District include; defilement, incest and child marriage. The perpetrators were reported to be mostly people close to children such as family members, neighbours, teachers and in a few cases, strangers. Presented and discussed in this part are the socio-cultural factors, which according to the police investigative officers hinder them from doing a thorough investigation of sexual abuse in Kamuli District. The generated sub-themes included; failure and delayed disclosure of abuse/abuser, ignorance, community beliefs, inadequate cooperation from parents and guardians and taboos regarding discussion of sex in public and presented and discussed in the next;

##### ***4.1 Failure and Delayed Disclosure of the Abuse/Abuser***

Failure and delayed disclosure of sexual harassment was reported to be one of the major sociocultural factors that act as a barrier to investigating CSA in Kamuli District. According to the officers, some cases of sexual abuse are never reported at all while others are reported when it is too late to hold the perpetrators accountable. Participants narrated that other victims who choose to disclose, only report to family members and relatives. One officer from the CID Department who happens to be born in the same district said that there are many cases of child abuse that never reach the officer even when the community members come to learn about them;

*As a person who was born and works in this district, I am here to tell you that many cases of CSA happen but are never reported. The community members learn about them but choose to cover them up (Officer 1).*

This statement points to African cultural norms that silence the communities about CSA because of fear shame and stigma in case sexual abuse is revealed.

What was common among the participants was that disclosure is hard when the perpetrator is close to the victim such as a family member as expressed in two extracts;

*In cases where the perpetrator is a relative of a victim, such cases are not usually reported because the victims fear the consequences or reprisals like being stigmatized and isolated. I know this because I am interacting with people in the public and as police, it is hard to investigate cases without a complainant (Officer 3)*

*-----do you expect a young girl to report to the police that her father, uncle or any other relative has defiled her? (Officer 5).*

Apart from the failure to report, this study found out that some cases are reported very late or when they are reported, victims prefer reporting to family members and relatives. Officers revealed that some cases are reported at a time when it is too late to get evidence to hold the perpetrator accountable. This according to officers can be attributed to different factors such as fear and ignorance. Two officers from the SGBV office had this to say;

*Some victims of sexual abuse choose to confide in informal networks as opposed to formal networks. For example, some victims only tell their parents, friends and relatives instead of reporting to the police. This makes our work complicated (Officer 9).*

*We have had cases where parents or guardians delay reporting because they don't know the procedures or are afraid of being judged or blamed (officer 7).*

The findings of this study are consistent with what has been reported in the literature. For example, in Uganda, a study by Child et al. (2014) that included a sample of 706 children from 42 primary schools found that 56% and 50% of boys and girls, respectively did not report their violence experiences to any person. A study by Loinaz et al. (2019) found that victims of sexual abuse were likely to report when the perpetrator was a stranger. This according to Alaggia et al. (2017) can be attributed to power imposed by the family member, and fear of being excluded and harmed by the family member. More so, apart from family members using tricks that may lead to fear, stigma and shame, the victims themselves get concerned that they may not be believed by anyone in the family and community and end up reporting first when the perpetrator is a stranger (Chadwick-Charuma et al., 2022).

## 4.2 Ignorance

Interviews with police officers revealed that some victims of sexual abuse and family members are ignorant and have limited education about forms of sexual abuse. Officers narrated that apart from some children lacking sex education, their guardians and parents fail to recognize behavioural changes when the children are abused. According to the officers from the CFPU, some of the delays are attributed to this ignorance:

*I tell you -----it can hard to investigate some cases of sexual abuse in this district because there is a lot of ignorance about what child sexual abuse is among children and their relatives (Officer 10).*

*Some cases of CSA never reach our offices because there is a lack of sex education in our community, which results in a lack of reporting the perpetrators (Officer 11).*

Officers reported that some cases are underreported and victims never get support because of a lack of knowledge and information;

*We have witnessed cases which are underreported because both victims and their relatives are ignorant. Without relevant information, the investigation is compromised (Officer 6).*

*Some victims of sexual abuse do not receive the support they deserve because of ignorance. Even when they show signs of abuse like stress, depression and general change of behaviour, family members never notice this change (Officer 4).*

The results point to the low levels of education that have been reported in Kamuli district (Daily Monitor, 2021) which contributes to ignorance and lack of self-esteem amongst victims of CSA and their families. The results also reflect lack of sex education both in the school curriculum and in the community. The finding is also consistent with the literature that has been conducted in Asia, Europe, Africa and other continents. In Brazil, one study found that CSA was underreported and victims lacked support because parents had inadequate education about forms of CSA (Pedroso & Leite, 2022). In South Africa, Mathews et al. (2016) found that cases of CSA were underreported because parents and guardians lacked knowledge about the practice. Similarly, in Mexico, a study found that there was not only underreporting of CSA but, the victims also never had support due to limited education and lack of awareness of CSA amongst children, parents and teachers (Frias & Erviti, 2014). In Iran, a qualitative study with 15 officers in the offices of welfare organisations reported lack of awareness about

forms of abuse such as caressing as some of the factors that affect the investigation of the abuse (Danaeifar et al., 2022).

### ***4.3 Community Beliefs***

Interviews with police officers generated the sub-theme about beliefs that hinder them from investigating cases of CSA. Beliefs included protecting the family image from shame, settling cases of CSA in private and keeping virginity. According to the officers, such community beliefs always result in keeping the practice a secret and underreporting, which in the end protect the perpetrators at the expense of the victims of abuse. Officers from the three departments that this study considered raised this finding. For example, two officers from the SGBV department had this to say:

*Investigating CSA in this community is hard. Some perpetrators go away with it because of community norms like the desire to keep girls' virginity before marriage, which results in failure to report some cases of abuse (officer 2)*

The finding resonates with cultural norms and beliefs in most of the African countries. A review by Owusu (2024) found that in Africa countries emphasis on virginity contributes underreporting of CAS dues to stigma that arises from loss of virginity.

Other officers narrated how taking CSA as a private matter is a factor affecting their work;

*You know sexual abuse is taken as a private matter in this community. Sometimes, you hear in rumour that someone's child has been sexually-abused but wait for someone to report and follow up the case in vain. The investigators have nothing to do in cases where people are willing to settle their cases out of public (officer 6).*

The desire to keep family image was also reported as a barrier to investigating cases of sexual abuse by the officers in the Family and Child Protection Unit.

*In most cases, victims and their relatives decide not to report the perpetrators of sexual abuse because they want to protect their families from shame (officer 4).*

Similar findings have been reported in literature that has been conducted in other African countries. In South Africa, it was found that norms and beliefs related to keeping CSA

as a family issue result in underreporting of the cases of abuse (Mathews et al., 2016). Likewise, in Nigeria, Ifayomi et al. (2024) found that there are religious and cultural beliefs, which stigmatize the victims and prevent them from reporting abusers making it difficult for police to investigate the cases of abuse. Such findings have been reported in other countries in Asia. For example, in Thailand (Trangkasombat, 2008) it was found that communities prevent victims from reporting perpetrators of sexual abuse because of the desire to maintain family prestige.

#### ***4.4 Inadequate Cooperation from Parents and Guardians***

Police officers reported that in most cases of CSA, families of the victims refuse to cooperate which affect their capacity to do an effective investigation. Some officers cited cases where the perpetrator is either a relative or a guardian. Interviews also revealed that some families delay reporting or when they report, they do not provide adequate information to help complete the investigation.

*We have faced a challenge of lack of cooperation in our duty of investigating cases of sexual abuse----- . This is especially true in cases where relatives and guardians are the perpetrators. I remember a case of a 13-year-old girl who alleged to have been defiled by her father. Her aunt reported the case and when we summoned the parent, he appeared with his wife and they all connived to intimidate the child who ended up turning against her aunt, the case could not be handled properly because we never got needed evidence to warrant prosecution of the suspect (Officer 13).*

*Some family members, especially, the mother and child victim refuse to cooperate with us when the perpetrator is a provider. Do you expect a woman to allow her husband to be imprisoned when he has been a provider? (Officer 12)*

Studies have documented related findings. For example, in Brazil, Pedroso and Leite (2022) found that for fear of retaliation, 55 % of cases of child CSA refused to cooperate with police to hold the perpetrators accountable. A study conducted in the United Kingdom by Armitage et al. (2024) reported that in many cases of CSA, the investigation was affected by lack of family cooperation due to fear of shame and stigma. In Thailand, Trangkasombat (2008) discovered that most cases of CSA are affected by lack of family cooperation for fear of having conflict with the perpetrator. Such findings are reflected in the bio-ecological

perspective as advanced by McCoy and Meidlinger (2020) which advocated for consideration family and cultural dynamics in any attempt for policy making and implementation.

#### ***4.5 Taboos Regarding Discussion of Sex in Public***

Interviews with police officers revealed that in some cases, the perpetrators of sex abuse are never reported because there are taboos that prevent sex from being discussed in public. To officers, because of these taboos, the victims of sexual abuse are stigmatized when they try to report forcing them to keep quiet. Findings also show that these taboos result in a lack of sex education and consciousness, which end up shielding the perpetrators;

*You know in our culture; sex is a private affair. So, when a child is abused, he or she may end up not reporting because of the stigma associated with disclosing and discussing sex in public (Officer 1).*

*In this community, both the victims and their relatives prefer to keep CSA private because it is shameful to talk about sex in public and this hinders our work of investigating the cases of sexual abuse (Officer 6).*

*Some cases of sexual abuse are never reported because our culture and religion do not promote sex education and talking about sex in public (Officer 10).*

A study in India found that police find it difficult to investigate CSA due to sex taboos which prevent families and victims from reporting the perpetrators (Pandey & Reddy, 2020). In South Africa, a study by Mathews et al. (2016) reported that investigating cases of CSA is challenging because of the stigma surrounding the discussion of sex in public. Similarly, in Nigeria, it was found that there are religious and cultural taboos that prevent victims and their families from reporting the perpetrators of sexual abuse to the police and other formal institutions (Ifayomi et al., 2024).

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendation**

CSA has been recognized globally as a crisis and a prevalent problem, affecting the health and overall well-being of children. In Uganda, CSA remains a devastating problem even when the government has put in place different national and international laws and legislations aimed at eradicating the practice. This paper has reported and discussed the findings of a study that investigated the barriers that police officers in Kamuli District face in attempting to investigate cases of CSA. The findings of this study reveal that there are different socio-cultural

factors that include failure and delayed disclosure of abuse/abuser, ignorance, community beliefs, inadequate cooperation from parents and guardians and taboos regarding discussion of sex in public which conspire to affect the police investigation of CSA in Uganda. This paper emphasizes that in order to address the problem of CSA, there is a need to have a comprehensive approach that takes into consideration the socio-cultural factors, which hinder police from investigating CSA in Uganda.

Based on the findings of this study, this paper recommends strategies that could help police officers and the community at large overcome socio-cultural factors that hinder the investigation of CSA in Uganda. There is a need for educating children, parents, guardians and the entire community at large about the symptoms of CSA and the value of disclosing it not only to informal networks but also formal institutions like the police for holding the perpetrators accountable. The education campaign should include all the stakeholders at all levels in the informal and formal institutions that include among others religious leaders, opinion leaders, cultural leaders and political leaders. In addition, there is a need for effective implementation of policies that guard children against sexual abuse. This would help children to be protected against cultural norms and values and manipulation by the perpetrators. There is a need for empowering children to expose the perpetrators of sexual abuse. There is also a need to rethink and challenge all the norms, values and beliefs that act to promote the culture of silence when children are abused. Lastly, the education curriculum should incorporate sex education that empowers the children to be aware of forms of CSA and teachers to recognise changes in behavior of the victims of CSA.



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