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An Uphill Battle: A systematic literature review on the challenges of addressing Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in the developing countries

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Abstract

There is still relatively limited research that attempts to investigate child sexual abuse (CSA) from different geopolitical and economic status of a country. Previous research mostly focused on the general factors, prevention, and treatment of victims. This study aims to systematically review the challenges of addressing CSA in developing countries in Asia. Using PRISMA protocol, 17 articles were selected. Five themes emerged, leading to the conceptualization of the aetiology of the core challenges in dealing with CSA; taboo and social stigma, poverty, and economic vulnerability, witnesses of the legal system, lack of knowledge, and institutional and structural challenges.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, challenges, developing countries, PRISMA

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1.0 Introduction

The right of children to be protected from all forms of violence has been stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). However, three decades after the adoption of the CRC, the issue of child sexual abuse (CSA) remains one of the most pressing global issues (Simon et al., 2020). Despite becoming the first binding instrument in international law concerning children's rights and the most universally ratified human rights treaty in history, the ineffective intervention and handling of CSA continue to become pertinent obstacles, especially by the authorities in developing countries. It is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in a year globally (WHO, 2022). A child is at risk of being sexually abused at home, at school, or in the community.

The prevalent use of digital technologies could also amplify the risk. It is noted that sexual violence occurs worldwide and in every segment of society. However, children living in unfavorable economic and political conditions in many developing and least-developed

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countries are the most susceptible to being the victims (Loona et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2020). It is widely reported that the surge in CSA risk is highly associated with emergencies like armed conflict and natural disasters and is driven by economic motives (UNICEF, 2022). Children are very vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, not only by those whom they are close with or someone they know and trust, but they also become the primary target for CSA materials by offenders who attempt to extort them for content and financial gain.

The continued rise of CSA worldwide requires urgent action and solid measures at all levels. Most importantly, the unique challenges and obstacles of different countries may need to be understood to formulate effective solutions based on the local contexts. Identifying the origin that spurs the challenges of addressing CSA from the root is paramount, as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to this social problem. Target 16.2 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is to “end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children,” among others, can be one of the trajectories to combat the issue through localization efforts.

Despite global attention, more research is still needed that attempts to investigate the issue from different perspectives depending on a country's geopolitical and economic status (Gerda, 2023). There is also a lack of studies that thoroughly investigate the barriers to effective interventions and solutions. The trends of CSA research mostly focused on the general prevention of CSA, treatment of victims of CSA, contributing factors, community attitudes, and parenting concerns (Nkiruka David et al., 2018; Joanna Garstang et al., 2023; Noel Muridzo et al., 2018; Yanuar et al. et al., 2019; Elham Khoori et al., 2020). Hence, this study aims to systematically review the challenges of addressing CSA in developing countries to better understand the nuances, dynamics, and complexity of the issue from their perspectives.

2.0 Methodology

To guide the systematic review, we developed an internal protocol based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) criteria (Moher et al., 2015).

2.1 Search strategy

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) protocol has been used as guidance for the systematic literature review. The search has been conducted in three major electronic databases: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and Google Scholar. These databases were used to locate articles written in English and published in peer-reviewed journals from 2017 until now. The search string included key terms such as child sexual abuse, challenges, and developing countries, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Sexual Abuse	Challenges	Developing Countries
"sexual* abuse*" OR abuse* OR Assault*	challenges*	"Developing countries"

Table 1. Search String

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were considered if they met the following criteria (1) Challenges in addressing child sexual abuse or assault (2) Investigation of the knowledge, attitude, perceptions, or safeguarding practices (3) The measures to be taken to address child abuse (4) cases are from developing countries. The search technique was focused on English-language resources and publications. Articles were disqualified if they merely examined the prevalence of child sexual abuse or if the prevention strategy or intervention was intended to address child maltreatment in general without addressing sexual abuse specifically.

2.3. Study selection

Figure 1.0 presents a summary of the search procedure. A total of 1200 articles were found in the initial search, of which 900 were duplicates. Double-blind screened the remaining 300 articles. Forty-one publications were included as a result of this approach to data extraction. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria to these 41 papers, 17 of them were included in the final data analysis. While looking for information for the introduction to this review, one additional paper was discovered. The paper was included because it satisfied the requirements for inclusion.

2.4. Analysis plan

In addition to looking at each study's findings, we focused on the methodology and design, study parameters such as the year and sampling size, and country cases in examining the seventeen papers that made up this review. The themes were then developed from the main issues, which were mostly discussed and highlighted in the articles.

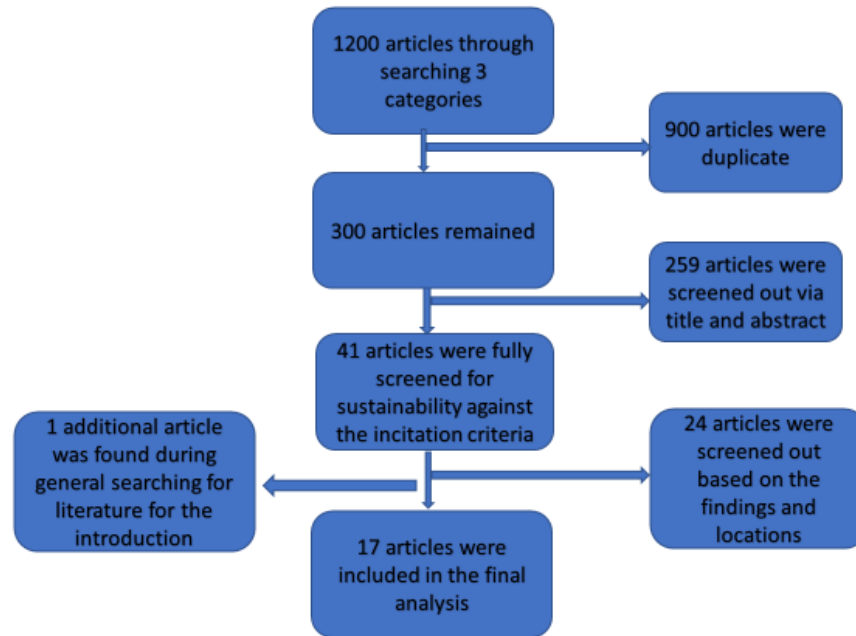


Fig. 1: PRISMA flow diagram of screening process

3.0 Findings

3.1 Overview of the study

17 articles were finally chosen for this review after all the screening processes were thoroughly done. The articles are based on research scope in Vietnam, Zimbabwe, Indonesia, Malaysia, and south-western Nigeria. Two studies were from Pakistan and Iran, while two publications were based on a worldwide perspective. The 12 studies selected are qualitative in nature and employed semi-structured interviews, case studies and focus groups. Five articles utilized quantitative techniques, such as surveys. Table 2 presents the descriptions of the selected papers. The themes emerged in the findings are weaknesses of the legal system, lack of knowledge on CSA, institutional and structural challenges, taboo and social stigma, poverty and economic vulnerability. These themes derived from ideas which are consistently discussed in the articles as elaborated in the following sections.

3.2 Types of Challenges

3.2.1 Weaknesses of the legal system

According to the assessment, there are inconsistencies in the laws related to the CSA. In this study, there were six countries: Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, South West Nigeria, Vietnam, and Iran, which state that they have a weak legal system when it comes to CSA. Therefore, the country's current legislation that directly addresses CSA must be put into practice. Nkiruka David et al. (2018), Nur Jannah Abdul Ghani et al. (2018), Nguyen Heip Thuong et al. (2019), Mohammad Imran Ali (2018), and Morteza Danaeifar et al. (2022) noted that to lessen the burden and bad health connected with CSA, it is crucial to provide public health education, advocacy, and sexual abuse prevention education in schools and universities. The legal system is filled with obstacles. The establishment of social work services and the enforcement of child protection legislation by the government are crucial for CSA. Parents and children should be made aware of the risks associated with CSA, and they should be encouraged to report incidents so that available victims can benefit from the opportunity to receive counseling as well as act as a deterrent to abusers.

3.2.2 Lack of knowledge about CSA

Six articles discussed the lack of awareness of CSA. One study by Claudia Cappa et al. (2020) states that it has increased public awareness and encouraged reforms in law, practice, and policy. It has had a tremendous impact on recent investigations around the world and led to critical new bodies of research. The Royal Commission's research has improved the understanding of institutional child sexual abuse in several areas. A study by Elham Khoori et al. (2020) investigated whether teaching by moms would help young girls in Gorgan learn personal safety practices. As a result, mothers can efficiently impart intimate safety knowledge to their young daughters. The study also emphasized that one alternative preventative technique to protect children involves training the people present in a child's environment, most notably their parents or carers. This strategy is in contrast to school-based CSA prevention education. Since the house is the closest level of the child's environment, parents are being addressed. Prevention and intervention measures for child protection do not specifically address CSA. There is a dearth of supporting data on CSA responses, and more study is required.

The study demonstrates how the school system's policy and curriculum can measure educational authorities' symbolic and practical efforts regarding the prevention of child sexual abuse. The School Policy and Curriculum Audit Tool offers a reliable and workable way to examine school systems' policies and curricula for their effectiveness and thoroughness in preventing child sexual abuse. According to the study by D. Russell et al. (2020), most empirically reviewed interventions in developing countries have been focused on preschool and primary school-aged children. Most interventions were administered in educational settings, with little emphasis on population-level interventions to prevent child sexual abuse. According to the study, if developing countries continue to focus on school-based strategies to prevent child sexual abuse, there will be a significant gap in knowledge of the efficacy of population-level interventions outside of school contexts, as well as consistency in intervention application. There is a need for evaluations that evaluate the efficacy of more extensive government-led or whole-of-community preventative strategies in reducing the actual prevalence of child sexual abuse or that can link enhanced awareness and skill with decreased victimization.

Description of included papers					
No.	Author(s) & Date	Type	Study population	Study Design	Themes
1	Howari Dubowitz (2017)	Article	Experts	Quantitative	Strengthening the legal system / Awareness
2	Nkiruka David et al (2018)	Article	Adolescents	Quantitative	Strengthening the legal system / Awareness
3	Nur Jannah Abdul Ghani et al (2018)	Article	Victims	Qualitative	Strengthening the legal system / Awareness
4	Nguyen Heip Thuong (2019)	Article	Public	Qualitative	Strengthening the legal system / Awareness
5	Katie Wright et al (2017)	Article	Community	Qualitative	Strengthening the legal system / Awareness
6	Joanna Garstang et al (2023)	Article	Community	Qualitative	Institutional and Structural challenges /Strengthening the legal system / Awareness
7	Kerryann Walsh et al (2019)	Article	Primary schools	Qualitative	Institutional and Structural challenges
8	Mohammad Imran Ali (2018)	Article	Community	Qualitative	Strengthening the legal system / Awareness
9	Morteza Danaeifar (2022)	Article	Social Workers and Psychologists	Qualitative	Strengthening the legal system /Taboo
10	Azza Warraitch et al (2021)	Article	Public School / Fifteen female children	Quantitative	Awareness
11	Noel Muridzo et al (2018)	Article	29 government and non-governmental organisations	Qualitative	Institutional and Structural challenges
12	Elham Khoori et al (2020)	Article	Mother - Daughter	Qualitative	Awareness
13	Yanuar Farieta Wismayanti et al (2019)	Article	Community	qualitative	Strengthening the legal system /Taboo, poverty and Awareness
14	D. Russell et al (2020)	Article	Community	qualitative	Awareness
15	Mohamed Abdullah Avais et al (2020)	Article	Community	Quantitative	Strengthening the legal system /Taboo, poverty and Awareness
16	Dionysios S. Demeŋis et al (2021)	Article	Community	Quantitative	Awareness
17	Sarah J. Brown et al (2022)	Article	Community	Qualitative	Institutional and Structural challenges

Table 2. Description of selected papers

3.2.3 Institutional and structural challenges

The challenge at the administrative and structural levels of the organizations and institutions in charge of child services is another issue connected to obstacles to providing care to children who have been victims of CSA, which two articles have discussed. In other words, particular executive and significant concerns within the Welfare Organization's body prohibit the proper delivery of services. The first structural issue is the staff's and service providers' inadequate competencies and skills. According to Noel Muridzo et al. (2018), numerous problems must be overcome, including staff and talent shortages, training and experience, material resources, Lack of access to suitable infrastructure equipment and logistical constraints, and Lack of professional support. Numerous employees lack knowledge of their roles, obligations, and methods for serving clients, which frequently results in harm instead of benefit and fosters the child's mistrust of professionals and social workers. Insufficient training and a mismatch between education, duties, and obligations are to blame for the Lack of skills. In general, ineffective and inexperienced personnel divert services away from sexual harassment victims.

The ignorance of some people regarding the existence of social emergencies and services for children who are sex victims is another issue at the macro and administrative levels. Even though the situation has improved, adequate information has not been shared in the media to explain the system and the social emergency. As a result, many needy people are denied assistance, and services are unknown in the community. Although naturally beneficial and fruitful, multi-institutional services and interventions often fail to produce the intended effects due to coordination, communication, and cooperation issues across the relevant organizations. Lack of coordination between sectors leads to miscommunication and difficulties between the responsible organizations, as well as insufficient intersectoral

collaboration to identify and refer abused children. The longer-term impact is the failure of accountable organizations to assist children affected by CSA.

In addition, there is a dearth of child protection system and skilled specialists. The report also points out that CSA data is not available in Pakistan. There is no official organization or data protection framework in place to deal with child abuse and violence. It is recommended that Pakistan revisit the National Education Policy to include sexual offenses against children by teachers in schools within the framework of professional misconduct, as well as review national legislation to include laws that protect children from sexual abuse in schools by the principles of the UNCRC (Mohammad et al., 2018).

3.2.4 Taboo and Social Stigma

Out of 17 articles, 3 discussed the issue of taboo and social stigma as the main obstacles to combating CSA. According to Yanuar Farida Wismayanti et al. (2019), sexually related issues are not freely discussed in some nations, such as Indonesia. Disclosure of sexual abuse is made challenging by this. Because of their fear of being stigmatized and the delicate nature of CSA, victims, and their families frequently choose not to disclose or report. Non-disclosure is frequently the outcome of the issue's sensitivity, especially in Asian society, which is more conservative. Most victims of child sexual abuse confront a severe decision about whether to come forward, according to studies on the subject. Most victims wait until they are adults to discuss or disclose their experiences, and many decide not to tell anybody for fear of upsetting their families, communities, or society as a whole.

Furthermore, according to Morteza Danaeifar (2022), the primary barrier to treatment for sexually abused children in Iran is the cultural and social concerns that prevent them from taking appropriate action. These difficulties stem from society's perception and attitude towards CSA. Hiding child sexual abuse is founded on societal pressure, such as the taboo and the child's and family's fear of humiliation and social isolation, which make families hesitant to lodge a report. There were also significant cases where even the medical and judicial institutions assisted in sweeping the offense under the rug (Yanuar et al., 2019).

Moreover, the child's fear of the abuser and their threats of repeated harassment, are the main barriers to revealing sexual harassment. One of the primary issues with social work interventions for children who have been sexually harassed is a lack of cooperation from their families. Part of this is due to the same cultural concerns and the desire to preserve one's reputation or avoid disgrace, which leads to incorrect information being provided to social workers, resulting in a lack of follow-up and treatment of the child. This Lack of cooperation spreads to the point where families refuse to report child abuse or having the child removed from the family. Whereas in Malaysia, premarital sex, whether caused by incest, statutory rape, sexual abuse, or teen marriage, is seen as a socially taboo topic for discussion. The culture of secrecy and social stigma in our communities has exacerbated the victims' condition and anxiety (Nur et al., 2018).

3.2.5 Poverty and Economic Vulnerability

The review also highlights that economic vulnerability and poverty may worsen CSA. A child's likelihood of experiencing violence can rise because of poverty. According to O'Leary et al. (2019), poverty, in this case, relates to poor child welfare, which includes poor health, a lack of educational possibilities, and a risk of being trafficked. Due to a lack of resources and access to knowledge on CSA prevention and intervention, families with low incomes and parents with little education had a higher probability of their children developing CSA. These studies show that poverty has a significant impact on child abuse and other forms of violence against children. Children from "broken homes" and those who live in poverty are among those most at risk of experiencing violence.

Since migrants frequently come from low-income households and have little formal education and training, their employment and housing alternatives put them at risk for concerns like incarceration and health problems. This situation demonstrates the relationship between migration and CSA, showing that movements motivated by poverty raise the risk of CSA. As a result of economic hardship and migration risk, children may be more likely to experience sexual abuse and other forms of violence. Poverty, urban migration, inadequate educational chances, and shattered family bonds are all interconnected, suggesting many sources of heightened vulnerability to CSA (Yanuar et al., 2019).

4.0. Discussion

The study aims to understand the aetiology for barriers in combatting CSA in developing countries. The results showed that there were social barriers to reporting child sexual assault. There have also been fewer reports of child sexual abuse because of the distance between parents and children, as well as the fear of being disrespected, shamed, guilty, and stigmatized. This condition has become the main factor in under-reporting offenses.

Many children do not report sexual abuse for various reasons. Among the most prevalent factor is guilt and fear to tell the truth and to face the reaction from family member. This is worsening as other families do not even disclose the problem while knowing that their child has been sexually assaulted for reasons including fear of embarrassment or perceived lack of evidence (Morteza Danaeifar et al., 2022). Most professionals and related organizations in the developing countries oversee the obstacles in handling child abuse and parent and child support activities. The worries and concerns that hinder the issue underscore the need for services provided by professionals and related organizations. As the reviews have shown that these interventions play a crucial role in disclosing sexual harassment and reducing the prevalence of child sexual abuse and its consequences, professional interventions are required to empower children and their parents to prevent child sexual abuse from occurring in addition to strengthening the social work services (D. Russell et al., 2020).

The legal ambiguities surrounding child sexual assault, which make it challenging to prove child sexual abuse, especially when done by a close relative, are another difficulty or disincentive noted in the study. In some cases, it has been claimed that the abuser's father was exonerated to keep the family's financial situation stable. Given that any action requires a court order, the findings about legal loopholes revealed that social workers are frequently prohibited from entering the home and examining the abused child. Additionally, the participation of social workers in court proceedings has not yet been formally established, and emergency services do not technically serve as judicial officials. Furthermore, many related laws are not deterrents and do not apply proportionately to the crime committed.

Shadowy laws and official indifference to sexual violence worsen these issues. According to the report, there are not enough specialized courts for child abuse, so judges penalize offenders with the barest minimum. Judges are impacted by prevalent cultural and religious attitudes and circumstances (Mohamed et al., 2020). As a result, proponents of children's rights think that the judge should hand down judgments that shield children from any child sex abuse. Managerial and institutional difficulties are the third barrier to child abuse interventions. It should be noted that supporting victims of sexual abuse has veered off course due to a shortage of personnel and insufficient training and education of child abuse intervention professionals. The same workforce is frequently subjected to pressure, occupational risks, and dangers to their lives. In addition, social work services and emergencies are unfamiliar to the community. The lack of intersectoral coordination is due to several factors, including a lack of infrastructure and facilities for abused children, multi-institutional delivery of services and interventions as a result of inadequate communication and cooperation among responsible organizations, and their island-like working style. The absence of comprehensive and appropriate programs and protocols to address the issue has prevented the proper screening of child abuse. Consequently, there were no appropriate intervention being implemented nor continuous improvement being done with the current approach of handling the CSA cases.

Furthermore, this systematic literature review shows that interventions and intersectoral partnerships of various organizations effectively prevent child sexual abuse (D. Russell et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be avoided before the problem arises. Even when the problem arises, clear and comprehensive laws will be able to help the victim to feel trusted and supported while the perpetrator or the potential perpetrator feels threatened and knows the offence is a serious crime and will be subjected to serious and strict punishment. Hence it is crucial to ensure all children, parents, families, and member of society at large must understand and aware of CSA through the mass media, schools, higher learning institutions and both formal and informal platform. Moreover, as socioeconomic condition poses as one of the factors that hinders effective handling of CSA, uplifting the socioeconomic empowerment and opportunities should be seen as one of the solutions to combat hidden perpetrators that were often the breadwinner of the family. Financial support must also be one of the measures to help improve the condition. This review has a few limitations. Data is still scarce and might not be easily accessible or publicly available. As a result, little information is available about how local and national governments collaborate to promote CSA prevention and intervention programs. This restricts the discussion of program effectiveness. Moreover, this review only covered empirical research. Many grey publications on fieldwork and technical reports that may provide significant input were not covered. The review only spans the years 2017–2023.

5.0 Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this research mostly came from the wide range of databases that provide good literature to be reviewed expansively. Besides, the study can select the most appropriate context that reflects the core issues in developing countries through strict appraisal and eligibility criteria.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations. First, the geographical context of the selected literature is limited and does not represent other regions with different socio-cultural norms, which has the potential to enrich the findings. Moreover, the study covers literature from 2017–2023 and academic research papers only, which resulted in a small sample size of final articles after the screening process. It is suggested that future research utilize more databases with long publication years, including practitioner reports, which could offer extensive and valuable information.

6.0 Conclusion

This review concludes that, while more research is needed on the incidence of CSA, several critical understanding gaps about how CSA is conceptualized in policy and legislation urgently call for attention. The five themes that emerged in the findings, although able to shed some light on the core issues, may need extensive investigation to address the emerging challenges constantly.

This review nevertheless serves as a crucial input to suggest better interventions. In developing nations, we must implement a thorough strategy to tackle child sexual abuse on various fronts. This involves increasing awareness, enhancing legal structures, offering victim support services, empowering communities to speak out against abuse, and tackling socio-economic conditions that make individuals more susceptible to harm. Collaboration among governments, NGOs, communities, and international organizations is crucial to tackling this intricate issue properly. In addition, enhancing legal structures and vigorous law enforcement to ensure that criminals are held accountable is another crucial measure.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes significantly to sociology and policy for child protection.

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