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Adultification, neglect and sexual abuse at home: Selected narratives of orphaned girls in KwaMashu, South Africa

Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi[1] | **Emmanuel Mayeza**[2]

[1]School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pinetown, South Africa

[2]Department of Sociology, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

Correspondence
Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi, School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pinetown, South Africa.
Email: ngidin10@ukzn.ac.za

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Abstract

This paper explores two orphaned girls' accounts of victimization and vulnerability to child sexual abuse in their family homes. Interviews with these girls revealed a trend of neglect, adversity and processes of adultification which involved accounts of sexual abuse within their family homes. According to the data, the participants are vulnerable and they experience victimization as they are routinely sexually abused by older male relatives and non-related men and boys inside their family homes – where they are supposed to feel safe and protected. We argue that these two young girls' experiences need to be understood as consequences of the prevailing cultures of toxic heteropatriarchal masculinities which have produced and normalized the distribution of male power over girls. The kinds of interventions required to address toxic masculinities and to insulate orphan girls from sexual abuse and neglect are also discussed.

KEYWORDS
adultification, child sexual abuse, family home, neglect, orphaned girls, victim blaming

INTRODUCTION

This study explores the narratives of vulnerability to child sexual abuse (CSA) of two orphaned girls in their South African family homes. The global orphanhood crisis took centre stage in the last 20 years as the HIV crisis and AIDS-related deaths left millions of children without support and care from their biological parents (UNICEF, 2017; Yeboah, 2018). However, it is not only HIV and AIDS that have amplified the orphanhood crisis globally. Other factors such as fatal cases of community-level and domestic violence, civil wars, health-related fatalities, politically motivated conflicts and poor socioeconomic conditions increased the number of children who are orphaned (Breuning & Ishiyama, 2011). Literature reports multiple vulnerabilities faced by orphans (Morantz et al., 2013; Morrow & Pells, 2012). These studies find that orphans often grow up in poor and unsafe conditions (Cluver & Orkin, 2009), have few opportunities to support their healthy development (Cluver et al., 2008) and generally have little protection from abuse and exploitation (Hermenau et al., 2015). Orphaned children face a great propensity to grow up without significant adult role models who can insulate them from CSA (Seloilwe & Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2009). The risks and harm faced by orphans are also heightened in contexts where they live within historically violent, marginalized and socioeconomically distressed communities (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018). Because of these factors, orphans are a significant group on which to focus care, support, protection and research to raise awareness about childhood vulnerabilities and victimizations – and this work can help towards finding effective solutions.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child declares the importance of giving children the voice to speak about issues that concern them. However, three decades since the UNCRC declaration, very little has been documented in the literature about orphaned girls who live in global south townships (including those in so-called ghetto and slum communities) in the context of neglect and CSA in their family homes. Also, based on our observations in the field, there has been an observable dearth of studies from the global south that pay attention to the lives of orphaned girls in the last decade as scholars turn their gaze away from HIV and AIDS-related research, where orphans' livelihoods and experiences of childhood were mostly analysed. Thus, this paper fills this knowledge gap as it foregrounds orphaned girls' voices as they speak about their experiences of neglect and CSA in their family homes in KwaMashu: an impoverished black African township in South Africa.

The false promise of safety and protection at home

Available scholarship suggests that the family home is meant to be a line of support, care and sanctuary for orphans (Taniguchi et al., 2019). For example, Hlatywayo et al.'s (2015) research, which analysed the challenges faced by caregivers of orphans at the household level, revealed that families expressed a continued willingness to absorb and provide care for orphaned children. Also, the authors report that individuals, such as grandparents, who assume the role of a caregiver, are significant for orphans' future socio-economic development. However, this household level of care and support is not afforded to all orphans. For example, early research shows that living with relatives can place orphans at risk for neglect and maltreatment (Thurman & Kidman, 2011). The extent of abuse is heightened in contexts where relatives live in poor socioeconomic contexts marked by heteropatriarchy. In this section, we draw on the notion of the false promise of safety to show that for orphans; (1) the family home can be a potentially dangerous

place to live, and (2) some relatives fail to act as protective agents, but can and do act in adversarial ways that support the maltreatment and sexual victimization of girls who have lost their biological parents.

Conceptualised by South African feminist scholar, Pumla Gqola (2021), the false promise of safety is premised on the idea that fear is a powerful tool for keeping individuals under control. According to Gqola (2021, p. 113), "fear forces girls to police themselves in the false hope that they may be able to negotiate their safety". Research suggests that some orphans (especially girls) live in a state of constant alert in their family homes where they regulate their behaviours to keep safe from abuse (Meinck et al., 2016). They do this by practising a sort of 'good behaviour' to negotiate their safety from abuse and maltreatment by relatives and others (Seloilwe & Thupayagale-Tshweneagae, 2009). This suggests that orphans may be aware of the dangers they face in their family homes and have employed age-based safe-seeking practices to keep safe from victimization. However, even the strategies they employ to negotiate their safety do not always work effectively (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018); thus, giving evidence to the false promise of their safety within family homes.

International scholarship has long pointed to the fragility of safety for orphans in their family homes. For example, orphans experience maltreatment and neglect from their relatives and caregivers in households, especially in poverty contexts (Thurman & Kidman, 2011). In Tanzania, 89 orphaned girls and boys reported experiencing frequent neglect and maltreatment at home (Hermenau et al., 2015). Also disturbing is a review of African studies, by Meinck et al. (2016), which reports that orphans are subjected to physical abuse such as being hit with a stick or other objects by their adult relatives. Orphans also describe instances where they have received violent blows from their caregivers, with some children left with permanent scars on their bodies (Ballet et al., 2011). Orphaned girls have disclosed experiences of violence in the form of overt and excessive physical discipline as a common feature in their lives (Harms et al., 2010). One orphaned girl in Harms et al.'s (2010, p. 6) study described the use of excessive physical abuse by a caregiver, who "used a lot of force" to instil "discipline".

Orphans who live with relatives can also be subjected to non-physical forms of abuse, such as intra-household discrimination, material and school neglect, exploitation and child labour (Morantz et al., 2013). Discrimination includes being deprived of resources and necessities such as food and access to educational opportunities (Cluver et al., 2008), or being forced to do excessive household chores than other individuals at home (Ansell & Young, 2011). Moreover, orphans who live with their caregivers' biological children experience bullying and rejection by them "because of jealousy or the belief that their families' resources [are] overstretched" to accommodate their orphaned relatives (Morantz et al., 2013, p. 4). Also, orphans report being threatened or "made to feel like a burden" by their extended families (Morantz et al., 2013, p. 6). For example, as reported by one participant, a caregiver often beat her and uttered expressions such as "am I the one who killed your [parents]?" (Oleke et al., 2006, p. 273). Throughout studies, orphans are at risk of abuse, particularly in households plagued by poverty. While the context of our study is also marked by poverty, we are aware that abuse takes different forms and it occurs across settings – issues of abuse and sexual violence against girls and women are certainly not confined to the South African contexts of poverty but they occur across diverse contexts (Perilloux et al., 2012).

Linked to abuse and neglect by family members, orphans, particularly girls, are also subjected to sexual abuse in their homes. For instance, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2017) has drawn attention to orphans' sexual victimization at home and concluded that these children are frequently subjected to sexual abuse by men and boys such as uncles, stepfathers and older male cousins. Likewise, in a study by Chase, Wood, and Aggleton

(2015), orphaned girls described episodes of sexual abuse from adult male family members who had undertaken to care for them. A review of studies on violence against orphans in the sub-Saharan region reports that orphaned girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse from family members than non-family members (Kidman & Palermo, 2017). What is clear from the existing studies is that some orphans live out their childhoods in a state of precarity in their family homes and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse at the hands of men and boys within the family home. We, therefore, theorize orphan girls' experiences of neglect and sexual abuse in the current study as one of the direct consequences of the prevailing cultures of toxic heteropatriarchal masculinities among South African men and boys (Mayeza et al., 2022).

Toxic heteropatriarchal masculinities producing vulnerabilities for girls

Despite having several legislations, intervention programs and policies in place for promoting gender equality, South Africa remains a heteropatriarchal society in which many women and girls face subjugation and vulnerability to forms of violence and victimization including sexual harassment and rape (Mayeza, 2022a; Mayeza et al., 2022; Ngidi et al., 2021). Generally, heteropatriarchal societies are characterized by male-centred power relations, rigid gender norms, regimes and values that work together in systematic ways to support the privileging of men, boys, and masculinities (Gray, 2021; Hall, 2019). This privileging gives men and boys access to power and control in families and other contexts. Male privilege includes ideologies and practices such as "treating women and girls as servants, acting as the head of the household, and being the one to define gender roles, and assign tasks and chores to women, girls and any other gendered body in the house" (Hall, 2019, p. 105). Male privilege is linked to men's violent behaviours and practices as men and boys use violence to demonstrate male power, control and entitlement over girls' and women's bodies and their sexuality. Within the context of hetero-patriarchy, male privilege and gendered violence, girls and women who become victims of male abuse are also blamed for men's violent behaviours (Kaufman et al., 2019). Thus, the concept of toxic hetero-patriarchal masculinity is useful in this study as it can help us to make sense of how certain gender norms and values (re)produce a toxic culture that protects the abusers while blaming the female victims of male-perpetrated sexual violence (Kaufman et al., 2019). As Gray (2021, p. 47) has argued, ideologies of toxic hetero-patriarchal masculinity operate both on macro (politics, economy, public institutions) and micro (domestic relations, interpersonal relations among relatives) levels of society to "influence individuals to engage in behaviours which support patriarchy to preserve the subjugation of women, girls and femininities". Using toxic heteropatriarchal masculinity as a theoretical tool with which to examine the orphan girls' accounts of CSA, we view these accounts as products of the workings of toxic heteropatriarchal masculinity in the micro-level context of relatives, and those individuals who have access to the family home. Micro-level toxic hetero-patriarchal masculinity manifests itself in various ways, such as through violent expressions of gender power relations by men/boys in which women/girls are subjected to sexual abuse and other oppressive behaviours at home (Gray, 2021). In the current study context, we examine practices of toxic hetero-patriarchal masculinity as witnessed and experienced by teenage orphaned girls in unique family settings. We approach the analysis with a theoretical lens that says that these orphaned girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse as a result of the toxic hetero-patriarchal masculinities of some male family members and non-relative men who have access to the participants' households.

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Context

This study took place in KwaMashu – a socio-economically distressed township neighbourhood near the city of Durban, in South Africa. The township is made up of government-subsidized small-sized houses, and informal and low-income housing settlements accommodating the unemployed and working-class people. According to the South African Police Services (South African Police Services, 2021), KwaMashu has a reputation for high rates of violent crimes. However, this is not surprising given that South African townships are notoriously characterized by low levels of community facilities, high unemployment rates, routine crime, and violence, as well as high rates of poverty (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Of interest to this study, the country is considered "anything but a child-friendly society" (Bateman, 2015, p. 170). For example, many children in South Africa live in households defined as very poor, and black African children are particularly vulnerable to chronic poverty (Hall, 2022). Statistics South Africa (2017) reports that the most vulnerable children to extreme poverty, neglect and abuse are those who live in resource-poor black African townships. Living in poor communities that are known to be high-risk and have high rates of poverty, unemployment and substance abuse (such as KwaMashu) places children at high risk for CSA in their family homes and neighbourhoods (Fouche et al., 2019). While Durban, the central business district nearest to KwaMashu, has the largest and busiest port on the African continent and is the third wealthiest city in South Africa, still, it hosts several poor townships that are characterized by high levels of socioeconomic distress. KwaMashu, with an estimated population of over 175 000 black African people, is counted as number 15 among South Africa's most densely populated low-income housing communities (Writer, 2016), and reports high unemployment, poverty and crimes that are sometimes fatal (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Our analysis of the girls' accounts of CSA is located within this context of perilous socioeconomic conditions which increases girls' vulnerability to victimization and CSA.

Participants and data gathering

This study was extracted from a larger case study with 14 teenage orphan girls (aged 13–17 years) who were purposively selected from a secondary school in KwaMashu. The larger study examined orphaned girls' understandings of, as well as vulnerability, and experiences with CSA in and around their school. Participants were selected on the basis that they had lost both their biological parents through death. In its design, the case study used qualitative methods to engage these children in year-long research to reflect on their understandings and experiences of sexual abuse. Much of the participants' experiences of sexual abuse were centred around their school and the broader township community. However, as the research progressed, the first author, who was the lead investigator, began to pay attention to the experiences of CSA of two teenage orphaned girls who lived with their relatives. During one group discussion, while the larger group of girls solely spoke of experiences outside their households, the two girls we speak of in this paper drew on their experiences of neglect, which, in turn, exposed them to CSA in their family homes. This triggered the need to examine these narratives more in-depth. Thus, the first author invited the two girls, Sindi and Linda (not their real names), to engage in individual interviews to explore their accounts of CSA in depth. The author approached them with the hope that the research might offer a safe space to reflect and narrate their experiences; a request they

accepted. Thus, data for this paper come from two in-depth interviews of 2 h each (on separate days) with Sindi and Linda. Both girls were 16 years old, attending Grade 10, and lived with their relatives at the time of this research. This paper investigates their accounts of neglect and CSA which they said occurred when they were younger: eight-10 years old. Sindi lived with her paternal relatives who comprised of a grandmother, uncles and aunts, as well as cousins. Linda, on the other hand, lived with an older step-sister and a younger biological sister.

To contribute toward generating trustworthy data, both girls were interviewed in IsiZulu, their home language. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis and also so that broader audiences might access and understand the data. To avoid distortions and to ensure accuracy in the translated data, as an isiZulu home language speaker, the first author translated the data from isiZulu to English. Then, the isiZulu and English versions of the data were reviewed and confirmed as accurate by the second author, who is also an IsiZulu home language speaker. The translated data were then analysed following an inductive thematic analysis approach. Again, both authors worked collaboratively in developing the codes and establishing the themes. Our process of analysing the data was aligned with Braun and Clark (2006, p. 87) six phases of thematic analysis: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Importantly, our processes of analysing the data were informed by the need to foreground girls' voices, perspectives, and understandings of their experiences of violence and abuse at home.

Ethics

Ethical approval to conduct this research was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal College of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education provided permission to approach and recruit orphans from a school in KwaMashu. To access the participants, we negotiated and received written consent from the participants' primary caregivers and the school's management. After explaining the research, the participants granted us written assent for their participation. Since this study worked with children deemed vulnerable, and because of the sensitive nature of the topic of CSA, we negotiated and received support from two social workers who provided psychosocial services to the participants if and when they needed them. Further, since the South African Children's Act 38/2005 stipulates that cases of child abuse be reported to social authorities, the emerging narratives of violence were discussed with the social workers. The participants did consult (voluntarily) with the social workers and we trust that as trained professionals in the service of child welfare, the social workers were capable of advising the participants or acting accordingly.

FINDINGS

Becoming an orphan and the Adultification of the two orphaned girls

Findings reveal that even before the onset of CSA at home, the orphaned girls were vulnerable to orphanhood-related adversities. These adverse childhood experiences saw them being positioned into adult-centric roles in their homes. In other words, the two orphaned girls in this study experienced adultification, which is a socialization process in which children function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational contexts and necessity, especially in

poor households (Epstein et al., 2017). Adultification is often interwoven with household strains and the premature adoption of adult roles and chores that children are not developmentally prepared for, such as caregiving. For example, Sindi relayed her story of becoming an orphan and the attendant experience of adultification as follows:

> Both my parents died because they were sick with HIV and AIDS. My father died when I was two years old. He left me with my mother who did not have an extended family of her own. She grew up sheltered in the Eastern Cape by a woman she was not related to. She stayed there from when she was 16 years until she left to look for employment in Durban. She eventually found work and a place to stay. That is when she met my father, and I was born in that relationship. When my father died I was then left alone with my mother who later started being very ill and she also later passed on. Many times, I would miss school to take care of her. My class teacher would call and ask what was going on with me because she could see that I was underperforming in my school work. I used to lie and say I had no problem, but eventually, I told her that my mother was too ill and had nobody to watch over her. I was alone with my mother until she died.

Sindi became orphaned when both her parents died due to illnesses associated with HIV and AIDS. Although there has been notable progress in the fight against the spread of HIV and AIDS-related deaths in South Africa, there is still a significant number of people testing positive for HIV (Satoh & Boyer, 2019), especially among people living in poorer communities (Mampane, 2018), such as the KwaMashu township. Hetero-patriarchy and unequal gender power relations have been identified as some of the factors that expose women to HIV and AIDS as privileged and toxic masculinities often demand sex without protection (Mampane, 2018). Women, because of their position of subjugation under toxic hetero-patriarchal masculinity, often lack the agency to negotiate safe sex with their male partners. In their intimate heterosexual relationships, men, as breadwinners and as heads of households, make all major decisions including terms and scripts regarding sex (including when and how to have sex). Some of the consequences of unprotected sex are unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted infections (e.g., HIV). As parents become ill, the children who were born unplanned are forced to engage in adultification to care for the sick, and when parents die, orphans are left to suffer from abuse and maltreatment. Adultification hampers the children's educational development and exposes them to further risks of abuse by relatives.

While toxic hetero-patriarchal masculinity suggests that men are abusive, the data indicates that other women too (e.g., older sisters) in the family do engage in practices that are harmful and abusive to the young orphans. Linda, for example, became a double-orphan as a primary school-girl and she was left in the care of her older step-sister. Besides the adverse childhood experience of losing both parents, Linda reported forms of neglect, maltreatment, and adultification at her family home. For instance, her older step-sister routinely left her baby to be cared for by Linda. This complicated matters further since Linda had to also care for her younger biological sister. Neglect included being left alone at night and without any food. Linda also reported acts of verbal abuse by her older sister.

> After my parents' death, I stayed with my older step-sister and a younger biological sister. My step-sister used to be verbally abusive toward us. She would even leave us alone with her infant child all night, and I was forced to change the baby's nappies

> when she cried during the night. The baby would cry because she also did not have milk formula. I would end up making her tea so that she would stop crying. Sometimes I added maize meal to water and offered the baby to drink because I did not know what to do.

These findings reveal a trend where these young orphaned girls were neglected, maltreated and burdened with adult-centric roles and responsibilities. In an environment where poverty and child abuse are routine (Bhana, 2015; Sibeko & Luthuli, 2018), Sindi and Linda were fundamentally at risk of, and could not escape, experiencing forms of abuse, neglect and adultification in their family homes. This trend positioned these girls as victims of their orphanhood. Their orphanhood exposed them to CSA.

Sindi's experiences with relatives and sexual abuse at home

The home was experienced by Sindi as a place where she faced a regime of terror and violence at the hands of her older male cousin.

> I will talk about what happens at home. So, this one day when I was washing dishes in the kitchen, my older cousin who smokes weed (cannabis) asked me to prepare some food for him, and then he started fondling my buttocks. At first, I didn't pay him much attention. I just told him I will make him some food, but he needs to stop touching me because I don't like what he was doing. When I was done making him food and I took it to him in his bedroom, which was dark, he asked me to put the food on his table. When I was about to walk out the door he pulled me in and said "if only you were an adult I would be kissing you right now". I said to him "leave me alone because I'm a child". He tried to hold me closer to him but I pushed him back and I ran out.

Several things are emerging from the excerpt above. First, is the issue of heteropatriarchy and its associated hegemonic masculinity which works to control and subordinate girls, their bodies, and their spatial freedom (Ngidi, 2022). Sindi operated in a space where she endured abuse by somebody she should have been able to trust. She was subordinated as she attempted to resist her cousin's unwanted sexual attention, harassment, and humiliation. Second, at first, Sindi did not view her assault as something serious. Since the harassment came from a relative, she first minimized the abusive experience, even going as far as making him food. Third, tied to the above, because of her identity as an orphaned girl, Sindi is reduced to a gendered domestic role of a servant in the household. Through this gendering emerged the act of her adultification through, for example, taking on the role of making food for, and serving, her male cousin. In the process of her adultification, she was also sexualized and harassed. While the cousin acknowledged that Sindi was a child, in the face of his predatory desires and because of the gender power he holds as a man, he quickly erased Sindi's child-like self through persistent sexual harassment. In his view, therefore, Sindi fitted the profile of an adult woman who is heterosexual and sexually active. Other researchers have also noted the tendency of adults to view black girls as more adult-like than they are. For example, based on her research with inner-city black teenage girls in the United States, Morris (2016) underlines the tendency of men to view black girls as more adult-like than they are.

Like Mayeza (2022a), our findings indicate that sexual victimization is not always perpetrated by strangers. As demonstrated by Sindi's experience, CSA does occur inside the family home where it is perpetrated by individuals who have immediate access to orphaned girls just by being family.

> Sometime later, after school, I told some of the adults at home that I was not feeling okay. When they asked me what was wrong, I told them what my cousin had done. My aunt asked me why I kept quiet for such a long time. In other words, she did not believe I was telling the truth.

Existing research has challenged the view that extended families are unable to care for orphans. For example, Motha (2018) qualitative study on the lived experiences of orphans aged 9–14 in a South African urban community found that, despite poverty being a burden for the extended family, relatives still provided emotional and educational support to orphans. However, Motha goes on to suggest that this support is strengthened by interventions provided by the school and community-based organizations. For Sindi, however, family support was a precarious notion as the concept of home presented to her a false promise of safety and protection from sexual abuse. Indeed, the home was a place of danger, which was exacerbated by her fear and experience of sexual victimization. Sindi's experience was further devastating because of the reproach and backlash she received from her relatives when she tried to report her victimization. She was subjected to questioning which had the effect of invalidating her experience of CSA. Thus, we can see here how toxic heteropatriarchal masculinity is performed by men (cousins) and is supported by women (grandmothers and aunts). Heteropatriarchy operates in adversarial ways to protect the abusers at the expense of the victims. This situation produces contexts where victims are trapped in the vicious cycle of victimization within the confines of the home.

> My aunt told my grandmother and uncles about what had happened. My grandmother then asked me why didn't I tell her. She also said, “in this house, you came through me. You came from where you came from to cause trouble in my house”. I asked her what wrong have I done, and she asked why I didn't tell all this township if I was honest. My grandmother is always in her church meetings and she never has time for me. She is very heartless but she acts holy around people. The next day they called me into a family meeting where they asked me a lot of painful questions. The cousin who assaulted me was also present at the meeting. I stopped myself from crying because they would have accused me of causing a scene and wanted to get the neighbours' attention. Everyone at the family meeting took my cousin's side. That broke my heart to know that everyone at home sided with someone who sexually harassed me. They know he likes to touch me inappropriately. He did not even show any remorse for his actions. I was accused of coming into the family to cause problems and making stories about things they have never heard. They also reminded me that I don't belong there and that I must be grateful that they are sheltering me.

Sindi's experience indicates how sexually victimized orphan girls are denied the opportunity to speak for themselves, their stories are not seen as truths, and they are blamed for the sexual violence perpetrated against them (Mayeza et al., 2022). Thus, orphan girls are forced to make many difficult decisions. For instance, they must choose between speaking about their experiences of abuse and being disowned by their family, or remaining quiet about their experiences

of violence and being grateful that the family is 'caring' for them. During the meeting described above, Sindi received a backlash from her family. She was positioned by her family as an 'outsider' who came into the family from elsewhere to cause problems, rather than a core member of this family. Moreover, she was never asked about her version of the story. Rather, it was her cousin who was allowed to defend himself. With toxic heteropatriarchal masculinity as a theoretical tool, we can see how gender inequality, which is often prominent in heteropatriarchal communities, privileges boys over girls. Sindi was not only silenced, she further received secondary victimization from her family by not being heard nor supported. Moreover, the fact that she was told to never speak about her victimization again implies that her agency in reporting her experience to the police or other social services was denied. These findings reveal how relatives play a part in heightening orphans' vulnerability to CSA. They provide evidence that some relatives are neither willing to accept that sexual assault has occurred nor report it to social or child protection services or law enforcement agencies so that the victim can seek justice. Furthermore, discouraging victims from further speaking about their sexual abuse created what Malloy and Lyon (2006) call 'dead-end-disclosure' – where a victim of violence is no longer able to report her victimization because her family does not believe or support her. Within the context of hetero-patriarchy and male privilege in which Sindi's experience is located, it is expected that her reporting of victimization would not be taken seriously. She is silenced and blamed for the sexual victimization she experienced; a trend that has also been observed by previous research (Mayeza, 2022a).

Linda's experience of neglect and sexual abuse by a non-relative at home

In another incident of CSA, Linda detailed how she and her younger sister were molested at home. However, in her case, both the perpetrators were not her relatives. According to Linda, her younger sister was the first to experience this abuse immediately after they became orphans.

> It is not always our families that abuse us at home. I was eight years old when my mother died. I was young and living with my younger and older sisters... Our older sister was a step-sister who continued living with us after my mother's boyfriend died. She (the older sister) used to have her friends visit our house and they would have drinks together. Even boys came to drink with her. I saw one of the boys molesting my little sister, touching her private parts.

She went on to relate her own first experience of sexual assault:

> One New Year's day ... this man who was my (step) sister's friend and who use to visit her gave me money to buy him a beer. My sisters were not at home. After buying the beer, I was scared to go back home, so I asked this boy from my neighbourhood to come with me. I explained why I was scared because I didn't trust that man. So the boy walked with me but stayed outside the house. As I walked in at home, the door suddenly slammed shut behind me. When I turned to see what was happening, this man (my sister's friend) grabbed me by the hand, pushed me into the bedroom, and threw me on the bed. I screamed and the boy I had asked to accompany me came in quickly, took the beer bottle, and knocked the man on his head. That's how I escaped.

The excerpts above highlight both the vulnerability to CSA among orphan girls as well as how Linda carries a heavy emotional burden of witnessing her sister being abused and of her personal experience of being abused at home. We view Linda's own and her younger sister's experiences of CSA as being organized through toxic gender norms and inequalities of hetero-patriarchy that legitimize girls' subordination, subservient roles, as well as the men's sexual objectification of, and entitlement to, the female body (Mayeza et al., 2022). Within this context, the men who assaulted Linda and her younger sister hold gender power and an authoritative identity that is permitted by heteropatriarchal norms. Linda's assaulter easily instructed her "*to buy him a beer*". His idea of a woman/girl being a servant and disregarding her feelings is further seen in the ways he tried to force himself on Linda. In this way, girls like Linda are rendered into a perpetual state of servitude to the man; a state that opens up avenues for the sexual abuse of girls by men.

However, not all South African men support heteropatriarchy or subscribe to the problematic discourse of toxic heteropatriarchal masculinity expressed through violence against girls and women. Even in communities infested by cultures of gendered violence against women and girls, some men and boys in these communities resist and challenge gender and sexual violence – although they may challenge the violence with further violence (Bhana & Mayeza, 2019). The young man in the excerpt above saved Linda from being raped. Despite his tender age, this boy has learned to use violence as a strategy in emergencies to challenge toxic heteropatriarchal masculinity as demonstrated by men who rape. As such, his act of successfully stopping the violence and helping Linda to escape gives us hope for a future generation of men who will resist toxicity, and, instead, support the protection of girls' and women's safety in their homes and communities.

While Linda was lucky to escape rape, her experience demonstrates a lack of protection for orphans even in their homes. Like Sindi, Linda also detailed an experience of backlash from her older sister when she reported her victimization. First, her sister, who was her only caregiver at the time, did not believe her. Second, when Linda reported the incident to one of her school teachers, the same sister punished her.

> I told my sister about it but she didn't believe me. Instead, she told the guy who abused me that I'm busy spreading false rumours about him. So, I reported the issue to my teacher, and we went to report at the police station. The man was arrested and the police came home to talk to my sister about the incident. As soon as the police left, she started hitting me with a stick. Although I have accepted what happened to me, I still really hate men. I get scared when I'm around men.

Linda's reporting to her teacher at school is an important strategy for victimized orphaned girls seeking help – given that members of their families are not always supportive. However, reporting to the teacher is a complex strategy due to Linda being at further risk of victimization by her sister based on this reporting. Therefore, while we support reporting to teachers, this must be done with caution and due consideration, on the part of the teacher, to prevent the further victimization of girls who report. The consequences of CSA are varied, and for Linda, hate towards men and being scared of men are the direct results of her experiences of violence. Without access to professional psychosocial support services (which is often the norm in resource-poor South African communities) (Mayeza, 2022b), rape survivors can live with the trauma, devastation, emotional scars, as well as other aftereffects of victimization for a very long time, even a lifetime (Perilloux et al., 2012). Against this background, the concluding section below will reflect on the interventions that could be considered for addressing CSA at home.

CONCLUSION

The prevailing ideology suggests that a family home is a place of safety, affection and protection for orphaned girls. The findings from our study suggest the opposite: that the family home does not always offer the desired protection for orphaned girls. According to the two participants, the family home is where they experienced varied forms of neglect and sexual abuse in the absence of their biological parents. Thus, family, and the family home by extension, are a great threat to the safety and well-being of orphan girls. Our findings demonstrate that with the death of biological parents, the family home became an unsafe place for the two girls in this study. At home, they were sexually assaulted by both their relatives and other non-related perpetrators. They were also not believed by their relatives when they reported their victimization; rather they were subjected to victim-blaming (Kaufman et al., 2019; Mayeza, 2022a) and they received a backlash or physical punishment for reporting. Therefore, Sindi and Linda experienced their homes as dangerous for them as orphaned girls.

If these findings have taught us anything, it is that the two teenage orphaned girls in this study are grossly under-protected and thus vulnerable to victimization in their family homes. The findings illustrate how CSA violated the girls 'personal protective line', which, according to Sigurdardottir and Halldorsdottir (2013), is a victim's psychological defence against violence. Given that the participants had lost both their biological parents, who might have acted as their first line of protection, their 'personal protective line' was broken, thus rendering them defenceless and vulnerable to different forms of victimization – adultification and CSA were prominent issues discussed in this study.

Being an orphaned girl in a home environment marked by chronic poverty as well as gender and social inequalities in their families amplified the participants' risk for experiencing neglect, maltreatment and CSA. Girls in vulnerable family settings need to be empowered so that they can recognize abusive behaviours and know how and where to access appropriate interventions. Because reporting to family members was unhelpful to our participants, girls experiencing CSA need to report to other people they can trust – outside the family where violence occurs. In the course of our study, we relied on the professional services of social workers to support our participants. But we also believe that teachers at school can also play a role in supporting girls who report or show signs of neglect and CSA to access appropriate interventions. Institutionally, the school, through its curriculum design, can help to raise awareness about neglect and CSA and direct young people to the kinds of services and interventions that support victims to deal with traumatic experiences. Government-sponsored programs, policies, services and resources are needed to support the removal of orphaned girls from abusive family homes to places and facilities where they can be safe. We end by noting that combatting CSA against orphaned girls at home is an important task that needs to be undertaken as matter of urgency, and the work must begin by destabilizing the longstanding structural system of toxic heteropatriarchy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no potential sources of conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5287-8531
Emmanuel Mayeza https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4551-7399

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Ndumiso Daluxolo Ngidi is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal. His research focuses on the understanding interplay of gender and sociocultural geographies in shaping children's experiences in marginalised contexts.

Emmanuel Mayeza is an Associate Professor of Sociology atthe University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa. He is a C2 NRF-rated researcher. His current research engages children and young people on their constructions and experiences around gender and sexuality in and around educational spaces in South Africa.

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